

**‘The Second Box Office’: An economic and  
cultural history of the concession stand in  
American cinema exhibition**

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I, Lucy Grace Hulls, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis analyses the development of the movie-theatre concession stand from the mid-1910s to the 1950s, situating the concession stand within the economic and cultural history of American cinema exhibition. The concession stand, it argues, grew considerably during this period, becoming a major source of income (a “second box office”) that helped many cinemas survive. Precedents it developed would serve as an economic model for the modern multiplex.

Chapter one examines the relationship shared by the concession stand and American movie-theatres during the 1920s, critiquing the existing narrative within film scholarship that movie-theatre refreshments at this time were essentially prohibited. Only one exhibition model from this period, the picture palace, fits this narrative but analysis of archival material demonstrates that this was far from being a universal model.

Chapter two analyses how the concession stand developed a much greater importance for many movie-theatres during the 1930s. Survival during the Great Depression often depended on exhibitors’ willingness to embrace non-filmic exhibition practices. The sale of refreshments, principally candy, played an important role in keeping many movie-theatres afloat.

Chapter three analyses how popcorn gained its foothold within the movie-theatre as a result of World War II. Deemed an essential wartime crop and benefitting from the wartime rationing of sugar which depleted candy stocks, popcorn consumption increased exponentially. The emergence of a popcorn industry from 1946 further cemented its position as *the* American movie food.

These chapters all centre on the traditional indoor movie-theatre but chapter four focuses on a different exhibition model whose popularity peaked in the 1950s, the drive-in theatre. Tailoring the movie-going experience around the car, outdoor exhibitors had much greater freedom when it came to the concession stand and some of the practices relating to food and drink developed at drive-ins would subsequently become multiplex staples. Having experimented with serving models and menu items over several decades, by the mid-1950s the concession stand was increasingly recognised as an essential and highly profitable contributor to the economics of film exhibition.

## **Research Impact Statement**

Accounting for approximately 40 percent of movie-theatres' income, the concession stand – alongside box-office profits and advertising – is currently a crucial component of the economics of the American film exhibition industry. While the concession stand receives brief mentions in general histories of American film exhibition, most notably in the work of Douglas Gomery, there are no dedicated histories. This dearth of scholarship was the starting point for this thesis. Based on extensive archival research, it represents an important first step in resituating the concession stand within accounts of American film exhibition. The impact of the thesis inside academia, specifically within the field of Film Studies is, therefore, significant. Dissemination of this research through future publications and past and future conference papers are key ways in which this research can be shared with others within the field.

Outside of academia a study of this type may interest those presently within the film exhibition industry. The rise in popularity of online streaming services means that, inevitably, it is non-filmic exhibition practices which are going to become critical to the continued viability of cinemas – at least in their current form. It may prove useful, therefore, for exhibitors to reflect on the development of the concession stand in the past, giving insight into what practices have already been trialled, their levels of success, and possible alterations and additions that could be made to current film exhibition practices. Past concession stand models might provide valuable insight and guidance on the future shape of the movie-theatre refreshment business. Given the popularity of movie-going today, this subject may also be of interest to the wider general public. Dissemination of the research, currently in the form of a thesis but later in a published monograph, is one way that it could be shared and reach a wide audience.

There is also scope for this research to be used for educational purposes. In 2019, I taught on a Summer School run by UCL Horizon's pre-16 programme, using my research on the history of the concession stand to design and deliver sessions about modern American history (1900-1950) to a class of 20 GCSE students. Discussing material of this kind helps young people to a greater understanding that history can be studied in a variety of ways. One of the sessions, for example, focused on the exhibition practices that exhibitors in the 1930s used to survive the Great Depression. Approaching the subject in this way engaged the students, giving them a new perspective on the period as experienced by the movie industry and cinema-goers themselves. Students were also able to compare their own movie-going

experiences to those in the past, something that interested them and also reinforced the point that, rather than relating simply to politics, history can be the study of real people's lives and experiences.

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## Introduction

For many decades it has been the case that screening film – the primary purpose of movie-theatres – is not the only source of their income. In the post-studio era, movie-theatres receive only a percentage of their income from the ‘box office’, a term referring to ticket sales. This is because profits are split between movie-theatre exhibitors, film studio, and distributor.

While film rental rates have varied, cinema exhibitors presently can expect to have to pay 60 to 70 percent of ticket sale profits in a film’s opening week to distributor and film studio, decreasing to between 30 and 50 percent in subsequent weeks.<sup>1</sup> This is a practice which favours production over exhibition and, consequently, box-office profits alone are not enough to sustain many movie-theatres economically. To compensate, exhibitors have had to look to other areas to make a profit. Pre-film advertising, as Deron Overpeck argues, is one such area that has been important at least since the late 1970s.<sup>2</sup> The bulk of other profits, however, have derived from the movie-theatres’ concession stand, which cinema trade press magazines of the earlier Hollywood studio era dubbed the ‘second box office’.<sup>3</sup>

The concession stand itself was a broad term used to refer to the sale of refreshments within the movie-theatre. It is an intrinsic component of the film exhibition industry’s current economic model. Writing about the state of American film exhibition in the 1990s, film exhibition scholar Douglas Gomery commented that: ‘In large and small chains alike, concession stands continued to produce millions of dollars in profits.’<sup>4</sup> This statement remains true of film exhibition today, though rather than millions it is more accurate to speak

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<sup>1</sup> Jehoshua Eliashberg, ‘The Film Exhibition Business: Critical Issues, Practice, and Research’, in *A Concise Handbook of Movie Industry Economics*, ed. Charles C. Moul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 146.

<sup>2</sup> Deron Overpeck, ‘Subversion, Desperation and Captivity: Pre-film Advertising in American Film Exhibition Since 1977’, *Film History*, 22:2 (2010), 219, <https://doi.org/10.2979/fil.2010.22.2.219>.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Herber Brothers, ‘Star Popcorn Machine Advertisement’, *Boxoffice*, 32:13, February 19, 1938, 94.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (London: BFI Publishing, 1992), 114.

of billions of dollars.<sup>5</sup> Gomery was writing of a particular type of cinema that emerged during the 1960s and has dominated film exhibition since the 1980s: the multiplex, an exhibition model characterised by its multiple screens in one venue as well as the prominence of its concession stand. Dominating multiplex lobbies and foyers and near-impossible for moviegoers to bypass, concession stand counters offer all manner of refreshments. Their role is economically key since refreshment sales, with their high price mark-up – popcorn, for instance, traditionally has a profit margin of around 70 percent – are the American film exhibition industry’s true money-maker.<sup>6</sup> The concession stand, far from being an inconsequential side-line, is an important business in its own right. The multiplex, indeed, is a viable economic model, in large part, *because* of the concession stand. This thesis seeks to analyse and explain how the concession stand came to be such an important component of the modern American film exhibition industry.

In order to do this, it is necessary to analyse its origins and early development. The thesis, consequently, focuses on the concession stand during the first decades of the twentieth century, specifically between the years 1914 and 1955. Analysing a wide variety of archival materials, it discusses the concession stand within the context of several different exhibition models, distinct movie-theatre types, and geographical regions, using these variations to demonstrate that there was much diversity within American film exhibition. The period covered by the thesis also largely coincides with the Hollywood studio system: its rise, rapid growth, and eventual dismantlement. This is an important point to highlight because the studio system structure had a significant impact on how exhibitors operated throughout the period under investigation. The Hollywood studios’ monopoly over the most profitable film

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<sup>5</sup> Zachary Crockett, ‘Why is movie theater popcorn so outrageously expensive?’, *The Hustle*, September 8, 2019. <https://thehustle.co/why-is-movie-theater-popcorn-so-outrageously-expensive/> [accessed on April 18, 2020].

<sup>6</sup> Anon., ‘Popcorn Machines Go Modern’, *Motion Picture Herald*, 139:7, May 18, 1940, 64.

releases meant that they controlled who could show these films and when, important factors that meant a large proportion of independent exhibitors had to look to alternative sources of income to survive. For many, the concession stand was the solution. Popcorn machine advertisements in 1938 were the first to declare the concession stand to be the second box office of the American movie-theatre, a title further reinforced by articles later featured in the cinema trade press.<sup>7</sup> One article boldly titled ‘The Second Box Office’ reported how the concession stand had made a ‘half-billion dollar gross’ in 1952, demonstrating its economic importance to the economic model of American film exhibition at that time.<sup>8</sup> This thesis seeks to explain how the concession stand had reached such heights by the early 1950s, ultimately truly establishing its status as the second box office.

Hollywood’s primary output is the making, distribution, and selling of films. However, as Gomery has argued, ‘there have been few instances when films stood alone as an economic draw. During the history of commercial cinema in the U.S. feature films rarely have been able to stand alone as a source of profit.’<sup>9</sup> In order to gain a full understanding of the American film industry, therefore, it is also necessary to understand the elements that support it. In recent decades, looking past film production, scholars have paid increasing attention to other important aspects of the American film industry, including distribution practices, the Hollywood studio system, screen technologies, and – most relevant here – film exhibition. Since the 1980s, a number of revisionist scholars have focused on foregrounding these aspects of the American film industry and analysing the industry’s economic model, their work contributing to a wider discussion of the American film industry as a commercial business.

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<sup>7</sup> Herber Brothers, ‘Star Popcorn Machine Advertisement’, *Boxoffice*, 32:13, February 19, 1938, 94.

<sup>8</sup> Anon., ‘The Second Box Office’, *Theatre Catalog, 1953-54* (Philadelphia: Jay Emanuel Publications, 11<sup>th</sup> Edition), 342.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Gomery, ‘The popularity of filmgoing in the US, 1930-50’, in *High Theory/ Low Culture: Analysing popular television and film*, ed. Colin MacCabe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 78.

Working in the 1980s and 1990s, Gomery was a pioneer in highlighting the importance of non-filmic aspects of film exhibition. Unrelated to the films actually on show, these are aspects of a movie-theatre which contribute to the overall movie-going experience. ‘What at first glance appear to be trivial elements’, Charles Acland explained of the multiplex, ‘may in fact be salient components of the experience for a moviegoing population.’<sup>10</sup> Air-conditioning and comfortable seating are both examples of this. Honed after decades of experimentation, their purpose is to make movie-going as comfortable and enjoyable as possible. Gomery provides a fairly comprehensive if brief summary of non-filmic exhibition practices in his chapter entitled ‘Hollywood Control’, in which he outlines their development from the beginning of cinema until the 1980s. This chapter is significant because it analyses these traditionally undervalued components of the movie-going experience, demonstrating that, while often overlooked by historians, they contribute greatly to the economic success of cinema as an institution. The concession stand is among these non-filmic exhibition practices and, as such, received some attention within Gomery’s chapter.<sup>11</sup> Several aspects of his analysis are of interest here, notably his assertion that it was the Great Depression that was the catalyst for the concession stand’s inclusion in the movie-going experience. His discussions concerning its development during World War II and insight into its expansion in the post-war years (specifically Coca-Cola’s relationship with the movie-theatre) will also be revisited in this thesis.

Although an important starting point for this thesis, however, Gomery’s work on the concession stand is not without flaws. Condensing the entire history of the concession stand into just under four pages cannot by any means provide a detailed account. Moreover, not

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<sup>10</sup> Charles R. Acland, “‘Opening Everywhere’: Multiplexes and the Speed of Cinema Culture’, in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, ed. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 369.

<sup>11</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 79-82.

being based on detailed research, his account of the concession stand contains several significant inaccuracies and omissions, as this thesis will demonstrate. Gomery himself recognised the limitations of his work, and called for further research to be done, not only on the concession stand but also other non-filmic exhibition practices. In an earlier essay that laid the foundations for *Shared Pleasures*, he concluded by observing that

we need to allocate further study to the changing nature of the entertainment package offered by exhibitors. The history of filmgoing is one of constant change, and those of us who study the cinema have much to learn about the nature of these socio-economic (and psychological) transformations.<sup>12</sup>

Gomery wrote this more than thirty years ago but, as yet, relatively few significant advances in this field have been made. It is the lack of new work on the concession stand which is the main problem. Rather than revising and challenging Gomery's work to expand our knowledge, subsequent scholars, like Richard Butsch and James Lyons, have repeated and recycled his conclusions.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, despite the significant inaccuracies in his account, Gomery's interpretation of the concession stand has become the default position on the history of the concession stand within film scholarship.

When scholars do refer to the concession stand, often in little more than a sentence or a footnote, their telling of its history follows a one-dimensional narrative that can be broken down into the same basic structure: food was strictly prohibited during the picture palace era of the 1920s, a decision that was forcibly reversed in the early 1930s due to the economic

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<sup>12</sup> Gomery, 'The popularity of filmgoing', 78.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Butsch, *The Making of Modern Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 170; James Lyons, 'What about the Popcorn? Food and the Film-Watching Experience', in *Reel Food: Essays on Food and Film*, ed. Anne L. Bower (New York: Routledge, 2004), 315.

pressures of the Great Depression, and the concession stand grew from there.<sup>14</sup> This thesis takes issue with this reading of the subject for several reasons, mainly relating to how simplistic it is. Dismantling Gomery's narrative is central to the argument presented in chapters one and two. Rather than accepting his conclusions unquestioningly, this thesis seeks to show how Gomery's narrative can be interacted with, built upon, and ultimately challenged in order to provide a revised understanding of the concession stand's relationship with American film exhibition. Relying heavily on archival research, but also piecing together scholarship from several disparate fields, it endeavours to remedy the current dearth of scholarship relating to the movie-theatre concession stand.

In the introduction to an issue of *Film History* focused on the archival record of early film exhibition, Rob King commented that: 'if Hollywood is a text, then every one of its traces is part of that text.'<sup>15</sup> This is a sentiment that is very much at the heart of this thesis, which relies heavily on a variety of archival materials to understand the development of the concession stand and its relationship with American film exhibition. These materials include government records (specifically, the U.S. Agricultural Department Crop Reports), popcorn machine catalogues, and local newspapers. The first of these, U.S. Agricultural Department Crop Reports, are utilised in chapter three to discuss popcorn's growth as an essential crop during World War II.<sup>16</sup> The popcorn machine catalogues of Cretors also provide invaluable insight into the development of the popcorn industry, notably the evolution of the popcorn machine over the duration of the entire period of this thesis.

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<sup>14</sup> For example, see: Ina Rae Hark, 'General Introduction', in *Exhibition: The Film Reader*, ed. Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 2002), 14-15.

<sup>15</sup> Rob King, 'Introduction: Early Hollywood and the Archive', *Film History*, 26:2 (2014), viii, <https://doi.org/10.2979/filmhistory.26.2.vii>.

<sup>16</sup> Popcorn refers not only to the manufactured snack but also the crop that produces it. It is a type of maize and there are several different variations, the most common being yellow and white. Andrew F. Smith, *Popped Culture: A Social History of Popcorn in America* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 5-6.

This thesis has also closely analysed an extensive range of 17 cinema trade press magazines (notably, *Variety*, *The Film Daily*, and *Motion Picture Herald*), many of which span the entirety of the period covered by the project as a whole. The continuity of the sources across the period concerned encourages and enables analysis of changing attitudes and trends over time. Targeted at members of the film industry – producers, distributors, and exhibitors – trade press magazines are a fruitful resource for studying that industry. They reported on every aspect of the American film industry, including but not limited to: the newest film releases, technological advancements, and industry news. Mark Glancy and John Sedgwick demonstrated the value of this type of archival material in an article discussing the utility of *Variety* for understanding American film exhibition conditions in the 1930s. Focusing on the period October 1934 to October 1936, they demonstrated how *Variety* could be used to source data on box-office grosses, weekly attendance rates, and admission prices.<sup>17</sup> This data, when analysed, can add additional context about film exhibition conditions: weekly attendance levels and average admission prices feature regularly throughout the thesis for this reason. Glancy and Sedgwick’s study, and especially the way in which they used the *Variety* dataset, is characteristic of how film trade press publications are typically used by scholars. There are many merits to approaching them in this way but, in order to access the concession stand material, which is often hard to locate, this thesis has had to approach them in a non-traditional way, combing through them for any reference relating to the sale or consumption of refreshments within the movie-theatre, no matter how seemingly inconsequential.

Chapter two, for example, uses *Variety*’s coverage of labour disputes and trade union action taken by movie-theatre staff, including the candy counter girls, to discuss the nature of

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Glancy and John Sedgwick, ‘Cinemagoing in the United States in the mid-1930s: A Study Based on the *Variety* Dataset’, in Maltby et al., ed., *Going to the Movies*, 156.

the concession stand during the late 1930s. Wherever possible and relevant to the discussion, the role of labour in relation to the concession stand appears in this thesis. It is not, however, the focus. Within the context of this thesis, discussion of labour is used to glean evidence about what exactly was occurring within the concession stand at particular moments in time: the presence of a candy counter attendant, for example, indicates that by the mid-1930s many movie-theatres had switched from unmanned candy vending machines to manned candy counters. Other types of reports within trade press magazines also help to broaden understanding of the concession stand. Brief mentions of a robbery at a movie-theatre, for instance, often reveal a lot of useful details, confirming the presence of a concession stand, the form that it took, and even the daily takings, as demonstrated in chapters one and three. Close-analysis of these publications provides glimpses of the operation of concession stands but also evidence for deciphering the American film industry's attitude *towards* the concession stand (which for much of the period covered by this study was negative). Valuable as a barometer of the wider film industry's opinion of the concession stand, such publications often offer limited detail about the operational practices of the industry itself.

Fortunately, *Boxoffice* was one trade press magazine that took great interest in all aspects of the concession stand, and a trove of valuable information is available in its monthly supplement, *The Modern Theatre*. First introduced in 1935, *The Modern Theatre* focused on delivering articles, case studies, and advertisements relating specifically to all aspects of movie-theatre operation. Each issue focused on a different topic (for instance, air-conditioning or projection technology), but also had a dedicated section discussing the newest advances and developments within the refreshment business. Written by industry experts (*Boxoffice* writers, prominent exhibitors, and concession machine manufacturers), *The Modern Theatre* played an integral role in informing the choices and developments taking place within the movie-theatre. It consequently provides a crucial source for accessing the

history of the concession stand. The analysis of *The Modern Theatre* in this thesis spans a twenty-year period (1935-1955), covering not only the published articles but also the advertisements used to sell concession machines and supplies to exhibitors. From 1933, the *Motion Picture Herald* also began publishing a monthly segment focused on exhibition: *Better Theatres*. Similar to *The Modern Theatre* in terms of content, as the period progressed the concession stand became an ever-increasing focus of attention for this publication. The introduction in January 1941 of a re-occurring section within *Better Theatres* dedicated solely to discussion of developments within movie-theatre refreshments, called *The Vender-Vane*, is indicative of this.

Another key source of information, particularly in terms of analysing the concession stand within a studio-owned exhibition chain during the 1920s and 1930s, was a publication called *Publix Opinion*. This was a weekly magazine that was published by Publix (then the largest exhibition chain in America, affiliated to the Hollywood film studio Paramount) and issued to all its movie-theatres. An in-house publication, it was used to advise the chain's exhibitors on approved exhibition policies in the years between 1927 and 1932. Very few scholars have analysed *Publix Opinion* as an archival source, primarily because it is not widely accessible. Critically, it is not currently digitised unlike many of the other primary documents analysed here. But a complete run is available in the Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and a research trip to New York City in July 2019 enabled me to analyse this publication in its entirety. Such analysis yielded significant insight into the operational practices of Publix as an exhibition chain but, more importantly, previously unknown details about the exhibition chain's relationship with the concession stand in the late 1920s, findings that make up a large part of chapter two.

It is this archival research which has provided much of the detail and understanding of the concession stand and its development. But to support and complement the knowledge gleaned from archival materials, scholarship from a number of different fields has proved very useful in providing a general context and developing a wider framework for the arguments presented.

At the heart of the American film industry during the first half of the twentieth century was the Hollywood studio system. Its structure of vertical integration meant that, for most of the first half of the twentieth century, until the *Paramount* Decision of 1948, the American film industry was tightly controlled by a small number of Hollywood studios. They came to dominate all aspects of the industry: production, distribution, and exhibition. There is considerable scholarship on this system that helps explain how pre-*Paramount* Hollywood functioned – both as a producer of film but also an economic institution. Tino Balio and Gomery, for example, have both written extensively on the Hollywood system itself, discussing its formation, development, infrastructure, and economic model.<sup>18</sup> Other scholars have further contributed to this literature by providing detailed accounts of individual Hollywood studios and their exhibition chains: Edward Perkins has written about Radio-Keith-Orpheum (commonly called RKO, and referred to in that way hereafter), Aubrey Solomon about Twentieth-Century Fox, and Gomery extensively about Publix.<sup>19</sup>

Literature on the Hollywood studio system has provided a solid foundation for understanding the studio-owned and operated film exhibition chains during the first half of

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<sup>18</sup> Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993); Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: BFI Publishing, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Edwin J. Perkins, 'Writing the Script for Survival and Resurgence: RKO Studio and the Impact of the Great Depression, 1932-1933', *Southern California Quarterly*, 93:3 (Fall 2011): 289-311, <https://doi.org/10.2307/41224083>; Aubrey Solomon, *Twentieth Century-Fox: A Corporate and Financial History* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1988); Douglas Gomery, 'Fashioning an Exhibition Empire: Promotion, Publicity, and the Rise of Publix Theaters', in *Moviegoing in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, ed. Gregory A. Waller (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 124-136.

the twentieth century. A re-occurring message throughout Gomery's work, critical also to this thesis, is that the American film industry is, first and foremost, a business, one that is motivated by the need to make a profit.<sup>20</sup> This motivation dictated all decisions and developments occurring within the studio-owned exhibition chains across the period covered by this research project, significantly impacting on their relationship with the concession stand. It is important, therefore, to have a solid understanding of how the Hollywood studio system, specifically its exhibition branch, operated. Owing just 3,000 of America's 23,000 movie-theatres in 1930, it was the studio-owned exhibition chains that produced the largest box office returns – an estimated 70 percent in all.<sup>21</sup> This was a result of their monopoly over the nation's deluxe first-run movie-theatres, the vast majority of which were located in metropolises and major cities. The status and profitability of these theatres help account for their dominant position within film scholarship but, when viewed in isolation, the studio-owned exhibition chains do not provide anything like a complete understanding of American film exhibition. Literature on the Hollywood studio system, indeed, reveals very little about the practices of independent exhibitors or film exhibition outside of a big-city context.

Fortunately, another strand of revisionist film scholarship provides an important and much-needed counterbalance to the urban/studio-owned exhibition chain bias that traditionally dominated film history.<sup>22</sup> Scholars such as Robert C. Allen, Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley, and Gregory A. Waller have in recent decades all been instrumental in emphasising the importance of audiences outside the metropolis. It has become clear that there is not, and has never been, one universal American movie-going experience. By focusing on film

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<sup>20</sup> Douglas Gomery, 'Film and Business History: The Development of an American Mass Entertainment Industry', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 19:1, *Historians and Movies: The State of the Art: Part 2* (January, 1984), 89.

<sup>21</sup> Suzanne Mary Donahue, *American Film Distribution: The Changing Marketplace* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1987), 21.

<sup>22</sup> Gregory A. Waller, 'Imagining and Promoting the Small-Town Theater', in *Hollywood in the Neighbourhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing*, ed. Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 170.

exhibition in a variety of rural communities and small-town locales which had a higher concentration of independent exhibitors, these scholars have highlighted the vast diversity that has always existed within American film exhibition. As Fuller-Seeley explained her motivation in beginning her own research: 'I remained especially intrigued by the lack of information on movie audiences and film exhibition practices in areas outside of New York City and Chicago. When, where, and how did nonurban audiences gain access to the movies?'<sup>23</sup>

While understanding film exhibition in heavily urbanised areas is important, these revisionist scholars argue, it is equally necessary to understand how movie-theatres were functioning outside of the metropole as well. Allen has noted: 'Problems arise ... when the historiographical shadow cast by the metropolis obscures other equally important questions and other patterns of moviegoing ... outside the big city.'<sup>24</sup> This argument is fundamental to building an accurate and well-rounded understanding of American film exhibition in any period. An account of a deluxe movie-theatre in Chicago, for example, will provide significant insight into film exhibition in Chicago, but it is unlikely to reveal anything about movie-going in rural Nebraska at the same time. This example highlights a fundamental truth about American film exhibition that revisionist scholars and this thesis seek to establish: that there was no universal movie-going experience. The size and diversity of the country made that impossible.

Perhaps not as easily discerned in the archival record, movie-theatres outside of the urban remit, those in small-towns and more rural areas, were important nonetheless. Smaller and often less luxurious than their urban contemporaries, these movie-theatres were driven by

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<sup>23</sup> Kathryn H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), xii.

<sup>24</sup> Robert C. Allen, 'Decentering Historical Audience Studies: A Modest Proposal', in Fuller-Seeley, ed., *Hollywood in the Neighbourhood*, 21.

different motivations, appealing in particular to the needs and wants of their local communities. In their own regional analysis and small-town case studies, Allen, Fuller-Seeley, and Waller have all respectively demonstrated this, and the distinction between urban and rural film exhibition is a re-occurring theme within this thesis.<sup>25</sup> Archival evidence demonstrates that, throughout the period under investigation, movie-theatres in rural locales regularly tailored their exhibition practices better to suit the needs of their particular audiences. As this thesis will demonstrate, it was because of this need to experiment with the movie-going experience that, for many decades, it was in small-town and rural movie-theatres that the concession stand initially developed.

Each of the chapters is focused around a pivotal moment in the evolution of the concession stand, namely the various transitions in how the refreshment business operated, including from vending machine to manned candy counter, and popcorn machine to full concession stand business. Taking place chronologically, these key developments within the concession stand were themselves tied to wider developments occurring within the American movie-theatre more generally. This is not surprising. Over the course of the period covered by this thesis, there was a significant shift in the perceived experience of the movie-theatre on the part both of those within the American film industry and also audiences. From the awe-inspiring palaces of the 1920s to the more practical and business-minded spaces of the 1940s, this evolution had an impact on the shape and nature of the lobby space and the concession stand. The two were so closely linked, that their relationship by the early 1950s had become almost symbiotic in nature. The concession stand had, by that point, become an important and much-relied upon additional source of income for the majority of exhibitors, regardless of

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<sup>25</sup> Robert C. Allen, 'Race, Region, and Rusticity: Relocating U.S. Film History', in Maltby et al., ed., *Going to the Movies*, 30-43; Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley, "'What the Picture Did for Me": Small-Town Exhibitors' Strategies for Surviving the Great Depression', in Fuller-Seeley, ed., *Hollywood in the Neighbourhood*, 186-207; Gregory A. Waller, 'Hillbilly Music and Will Rogers: Small-Town Picture Shows in the 1930s', in Waller, ed., *Moviegoing in America*, 175-188.

their location or size. It is also important to recognise, as this thesis does, that developments within the movie-theatres were themselves shaped by broader events occurring within America. Each of the chapters in this thesis, to some extent, is framed by a wider historical context: the supposed excess and glamour of the 1920s, the Great Depression of the 1930s, life on the home front during World War II, and the changing nature of American society in the post-war years.

Chapter one examines the relationship shared by the concession stand and American movie-theatres during the 1920s, critiquing the existing narrative within film scholarship associated with the work of Gomery in particular that movie-theatre refreshments at this time were essentially prohibited. It is argued in this chapter that only one exhibition model from this period, the picture palace, fits this narrative but analysis of archival material demonstrates that this was far from being a universal model. Chapter two analyses how the concession stand developed in the wake of the Great Depression. It is this period that scholars usually see as witnessing the origins of the concession stand, but the chapter questions the accuracy of this assumption. Chapter three examines how popcorn gained its foothold within the movie-theatre as a result of World War II. Deemed an essential wartime crop and benefitting from the wartime rationing of sugar which depleted candy stocks, popcorn consumption increased exponentially. The emergence of a popcorn industry from 1946 further cemented its position as *the* American movie food. These chapters all centre on the traditional indoor movie-theatre but chapter four focuses on a different exhibition model whose popularity peaked in the 1950s: the drive-in theatre. Tailoring the movie-going experience around the car, outdoor exhibitors had much greater freedom when it came to the concession stand and some of the practices relating to food and drink originally developed at drive-ins would subsequently become multiplex staples.

The concession stand is currently a critical component of the American film exhibition model. However, understanding of its development and history is severely lacking in film scholarship. Much greater work needs to be done by scholars on the present state of the concession stand and its relationship with the multiplex exhibition model, but an important first step to achieving this is understanding its past. The concession stand did not emerge in its current form, rather it developed over time and in several distinct phases. Focusing on the first half of the twentieth century, it is these phases that this thesis will explore – investigating how the concession stand grew from humble beginnings in the 1910s to a multi-million-dollar business by 1955. Ultimately this thesis aims to demonstrate how the movie-theatre concession stand emerged and was able to cement its position as the true second box office within the evolving American movie exhibition model.

## Chapter One: The Age of the Candy Vending Machine, 1914-1927

In the first decades of the twentieth century, there was a rich food culture at many popular entertainments. Peanuts, popcorn, and candy were all readily consumed and sold at venues across America that included circuses, burlesque, and the nickelodeon. One space, according to scholars, that refreshments could not be found in the 1910s and 1920s was the movie-theatre that emerged after the era of the nickelodeon. This commonly accepted narrative of the concession stand (or lack thereof) originated with Douglas Gomery. In *Shared Pleasures*, Gomery succinctly outlined his reasoning for the absence of refreshments: ‘During the 1920s movie palace owners steadfastly refused to sell food ... the norm dictated that the higher-class theatre did not need the added revenue from the sales of sweets.’<sup>26</sup> Movie-theatre refreshments, according to Gomery were not just absent from cinemas: they were actually strictly prohibited, a conscious decision on the part of American exhibitors. Subsequent scholars (of film studies but also other disciplines) have accepted this thesis, with many arguing that it was only reversed as a consequence of the Great Depression, a period in which economic necessity outweighed concerns about image and status. The research underpinning this thesis suggests that this was not the case, and that indeed some American exhibitors had been profiting from refreshments from as early as 1914.

The current chapter will analyse the first strand of the established narrative, namely that refreshments were prohibited by exhibitors throughout the 1920s due to the unsavoury connotations that their sale and consumption brought. The second strand, relating to the concession stand’s supposed origin in the Great Depression, will be the focus of the following chapter.

While challenging the overall assumption that there was a strict prohibition of movie-theatre refreshments, this chapter also seeks to answer two specific questions: was there

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<sup>26</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 79.

actually a universal prohibition and, if not, what form did the provision of such refreshments take? In order to do this, the chapter itself is divided into three sections. The first analyses the foundations of the established scholarly narrative, discussing the specific exhibition model on which it is based: the picture palaces. Shaped by their location and the attitudes of those that frequented them, these metropolitan movie palaces had significant reasons for rejecting the internalised sale of refreshments. As this chapter seeks to show, however, the picture palace was not representative of the typical American movie-going experience at this time. The second section of the chapter develops this point, discussing why it is inaccurate to write about American movie-going as if it was one universal experience. This section also outlines the wider framework for the thesis as a whole. It explains the important differentiating factors – notably location and movie-theatre type – that need to be considered when discussing American film exhibition during any period, not just the 1920s. With the support of detailed archival evidence, the final section of the chapter presents a revised history of the early concession stand: a narrative in which refreshments were present and thriving within American movie-theatres throughout the 1920s. It was the nation’s independent cinemas who were the early innovators of the movie-theatre concession stand, and it is they that will be the focus of this final section.

## **Part I: A Strict Prohibition, 1914-1927**

### **‘Cathedral of Motion Pictures’: The Picture Palace<sup>27</sup>**

Described by one modern historian as a ‘fantastical palace of consumption’, the picture palace was an exhibition model at its height during the 1920s.<sup>28</sup> Located predominantly in the

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1990), 23.

<sup>28</sup> Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, 111.

downtown areas and prosperous suburbs of metropolitan centres such as New York City and Chicago, it was not a fixture of many smaller American cities and towns.<sup>29</sup> The picture palace's influence on the shape of exhibition during the decade, however, was far-reaching and powerful. Heralded as Hollywood's 'new ideal' of film exhibition, it was promoted by the industry as the exhibition model that exhibitors across the country were encouraged to aspire to.<sup>30</sup> Given its prominence within the American film industry at the time, it is this exhibition model which dominates scholarly narratives of the 1920s. While subsequent parts of this chapter will challenge the picture palace's ascendancy, the current section will analyse why scholars claim that there was a strict prohibition of refreshments within American movie-theatres throughout the 1920s – an argument that hinges entirely on analysing the picture palace exhibition model and the complicated class motivations and aspirations that it embodied.

The burgeoning film industry wanted motion pictures to become a form of escapism for its audience, with movie-going providing a few hours reprieve from the drudgery of everyday life. Advances in film-making and story-telling were key to this, but so too was the exhibition space in which films were consumed. From the early 1910s film venues had slowly been increasing in sophistication, moving away from the makeshift efforts of the early nickelodeon, cinema's first permanent home. This culminated in 1914 with the opening of The Strand Theatre located on Broadway in New York City. Officially the first 'picture palace', it was at that time the largest movie-theatre operating within America – with a seating capacity of 3,500.<sup>31</sup> Significantly grander than earlier film venues, its opulence was intended to provide an escape for its target audience: the middle-class. Technically the first

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<sup>29</sup> Jeffrey Klenotic, "Four Hours of Hootin' and Hollerin": Moviegoing and Everyday Life Outside the Movie Palace', in Maltby et al., ed., *Going to the Movies*, 130.

<sup>30</sup> Kathryn H. Fuller, "'You Can Have the Strand in Your Own Town": The Struggle between Urban and Small-Town Exhibition in the Picture Palace Era', in Waller, ed., *Moviegoing in America*, 88.

<sup>31</sup> William Paul, *When Movies Were Theater: Architecture, Exhibition, and the Evolution of American Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 100.

picture palace, it did not rival the extravagance of later iterations of this exhibition model in the 1920s – a period in which they were at their peak. Samuel (‘Roxy’) Rothafel was one of the most eminent showmen of the 1920s, and it was his movie-theatres that were regarded as the zenith of the age of the picture palace. Among the many movie-theatres under his management, the Roxy Theatre located in Times Square, New York, was the most famous. Opened in 1927 and with a capacity of 6,214, it was Rothafel’s very own ‘cathedral of motion pictures’.<sup>32</sup>

More than just a place to watch film, the picture palace experience was an event. The key to successfully achieving this, according to Rothafel, rested on the creation of the correct atmosphere. Writing in 1925 in reference to another of his New York picture palaces, the Capitol Theatre on Broadway, Rothafel emphasised the importance of atmosphere to the movie-going experience and, consequently, successful film exhibition. ‘Of course the picture is important’ he wrote, ‘and we could not do without it; but what we have tried to do is to build around it an atmospheric program that is colorful, entertaining and interesting.’<sup>33</sup> It is clear from this statement that film alone was not enough. The picture palace experience was reliant on much more: the surroundings, live music, and ambience. These grand movie-theatres were carefully designed to elicit awe and wonder from their audiences. This sentiment was perfectly captured by Rothafel’s description of an evening at the Capitol: ‘One of the most amazing and awe-inspiring things I have ever felt is to be in the Capitol on a Sunday evening ... thousands of people will listen, breathless, eager-eyed, and with all their senses focused on the stage’.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Samuel L. Rothafel (“Roxy”), ‘What the Public Wants in the Picture Theater (1925)’, in Waller, ed., *Movieworld in America*, 101.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

Writing in 1928, American cinema executive Harold B. Franklin (then Vice-President of Publix, the exhibition branch of Paramount) estimated that over 47 million Americans were attending the movie-theatre each week.<sup>35</sup> The particular movie-going experience provided by the picture palace was a factor in explaining this rise. Constructing this atmosphere was a herculean feat, largely attributed to two key characteristics particular to this exhibition model: the design and the service offered.

### **i. Design**

While its predecessors, the nickelodeons, tended to be fairly small, the picture palaces pushed capacity to a new extreme: they catered to *thousands* of movie-goers. Seating capacity varied but tended to be between 3,500 and 6,000, a staggering figure which capitalised on the growing public demand for film in America's metropolitan and larger urban areas.<sup>36</sup> Large auditoriums were required to accommodate these vast audiences, but so too was a network of interior space. Numerous foyers, vestibules, and smoking-rooms were needed to divert patrons between shows. In terms of sheer size, the picture palace was a behemoth. These buildings stood out on American streets due to their size, but also their elaborate design. Every element was meticulously engineered to exude elegance and luxury and, unlike the modern multiplex, each was unique. A key characteristic of this exhibition model was that each palace had a theme which dominated all stylistic choices, evident in both architecture and interior design.

Film was marketed as a form of escapism, and this motivation manifested itself in the buildings themselves. As architectural historians R. W. Sexton and B. F. Betts have argued, the picture palaces' purpose

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<sup>35</sup> Harold B. Franklin, 'Motion Picture Theater Management (1928)', in Waller, ed., *Moviegoing in America*, 123.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

is always and ever to offer entertainment to the public ... This purpose should, then, be the controlling influence in its architectural and decorative design ... The problem is to create a façade that shall first have an attractive theatrical appearance, in pleasing contrast to the general stiff and cold character of its commercial surroundings, – one that invites the attention of the public and tends to lure them to its doors with pleasurable excitement.<sup>37</sup>

The design of these buildings – both exterior and interior – was, therefore, critical. Picture palaces needed to stand out as the most appealing building on a busy street, a feat achieved largely due to their flamboyant style.

Two schools of architecture emerged during the decade, both with European origins. Beaux-Arts was the most prolific style, associated with several prominent picture palace architects, notably Thomas Lamb. Maggie Valentine has written extensively about American movie-theatre architecture, and has defined Beaux-Arts by its use of symmetry, as well as classical motifs executed in limestone, granite and marble.<sup>38</sup> Thematic inspirations varied but all tended to be modelled upon grand or exotic historical buildings, for instance, Roman villas, Egyptian temples, or European palaces. The architect John Eberson described the interior of Chicago's Capitol Theater in great detail:

The entrance lobby has a faience tile floor, imported marble wainscoting and a richly ornamented ceiling with motifs taken from the Villa Cambiasco ... The auditorium of the Capitol might briefly be described as representing an Italian garden under a Mediterranean sky, featuring a moonlight night.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> B.F. Betts, and R. W. Sexton, *American Theatres of Today, Volumes 1 and 2* (New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1977), 8.

<sup>38</sup> Maggie Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theatre, Starring S. Charles Lee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 39.

<sup>39</sup> John Eberson, 'A Description of the Capitol Theater, Chicago (1925)', in Waller, ed., *Moviegoing in America*, 107.

Eberson's words demonstrate just how meticulously conceived this theme was. Modelled on a Roman villa, the Capitol contained replicas of authentic Roman and Renaissance artwork and sculpture. Eberson was himself a prolific picture palace architect, most closely associated with the second architectural school: the atmospheric theatre. The key characteristic of this style was its ceilings. Painted and lit to look like a starry night sky, they were designed to evoke the illusion of being outside.<sup>40</sup>

The grandeur of the setting did not rest solely upon the interior theme of the movie-theatre, however, as palaces were also furnished throughout with expensive paintings, furniture, and rugs.<sup>41</sup> No expense was spared: the Chicago-based theatre chain Balaban & Katz (hereafter B&K) paid \$25,000 outfitting the Uptown theatre in 1925.<sup>42</sup> Even small details were important. Rothafel spent thousands each year to ensure fresh flowers graced his theatre lobbies daily. A minor extravagance, he believed details like this were crucial as they contributed to a building's overall ambience.<sup>43</sup> Many shared Rothafel's views, believing that expensive interiors contributed to the picture palaces' highbrow image.

## ii. Service

The same level of detail was also expended on ensuring that those who visited the picture palace received the highest level of service possible. To complement the grand surrounding, picture palaces employed hundreds of staff. Rothafel's Capitol, for instance, had over 350 employees.<sup>44</sup> Service became an important component of the movie-going experience, as

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<sup>40</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 39; Dennis Sharp, *The Picture Palace and other buildings for the movies* (London: Hugh Evelyn, 1969), 74.

<sup>41</sup> E. C. A. Bullock, 'Theater Entrances and Lobbies (1925)', in Waller, ed., *Moviegoing in America*, 105.

<sup>42</sup> Gomery, 'Fashioning an Exhibition Empire', 126.

<sup>43</sup> Rothafel, 'What the Public Wants in the Picture Theater', 100.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

integral as the building's design. In 1928, Franklin wrote extensively about picture palace management, specifically staff behaviour. He believed that in order to provide excellent customer service, staff required strict training:

Good manners, courtesy, and consideration for others should be noticeable in your conduct ... A quiet attentive manner will go a long way toward convincing a patron that employees are trying to please ... Proper drills of a military character give the uniformed staff suitable bearing and appearance.<sup>45</sup>

Regardless of their position, front of house staff adhered to a strict set of rules: to be attentive, respectful, and accommodating but fade into the background when not needed.

To cater fully to their patrons, picture palaces also offered additional services. It was not uncommon, for instance, for them to offer free childcare within in-house playrooms staffed by nannies.<sup>46</sup> The picture palace was able to distinguish itself further by offering air-conditioning. From a modern perspective this may seem inconsequential, but air-conditioning was rare during the 1920s, not only within movie-theatres, but also many other public buildings. Expensive to install and operate, it was deemed essential by a minority of exhibitors considering the impact that the weather could have on attendance.<sup>47</sup> A comparatively small luxury, air-conditioning helped to reinforce the picture palace's level of extravagance. It did not become a standard feature of mainstream movie-theatres and public buildings until the mid-1930s and is, therefore, another example of the picture palace's superiority.

Picture palaces did all they could to cater to movie-goers' every comfort and whim, providing an experience unavailable at smaller movie-theatres. Their level of service and

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<sup>45</sup> Franklin, 'Motion Picture Theater Management', 118, 120.

<sup>46</sup> Gomery, 'Fashioning an Empire', 127.

<sup>47</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 69; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 75.

grandeur was more akin to that of high-end hotels and department stores. The comparison here is an apt one since all three shared many similarities, aesthetically, but also in regard to their business ambitions and the kind of patron they hoped to attract. Like the picture palace, premium hotels such as the Waldorf-Astoria and department stores like Macy's and Bloomingdales (all located in New York City), represented the pinnacle of their kind. They were *the* ideal to which smaller businesses aspired to reach – and, in turn, they had a significant influence on metropolitan film exhibition.<sup>48</sup> A. K. Sandoval-Strausz, who has written extensively on the history of the American hotel, suggests that at the turn of the twentieth century hotels like the Waldorf-Astoria were 'engines of modernity', a powerful model of efficient and high-end service.<sup>49</sup> It is unsurprising, therefore, that film exhibitors turned to them for inspiration. There were many practical reasons for this, for instance, their exemplary customer service models, but the motivation ran deeper than this. Exhibitors were desperately trying to cultivate a highbrow image for the picture palace – exactly the type of image that the Waldorf-Astoria and Macy's had established decades before.

### **'As Unthinkable as Food in a Church': Highbrow Status versus Refreshments<sup>50</sup>**

It is important to emphasise that according to the existing dominant scholarly narrative, refreshments were not simply absent from picture palaces, but strictly prohibited – a conscious and intentional ban on the part of exhibitors. The primary objection given by many exhibitors was that refreshments were simply too messy. 'Tommy's Tattles', a satirical column written by Thomas J. Gray and published in the film trade press magazine *Variety*,

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<sup>48</sup> Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, 111.

<sup>49</sup> A. K. Sandoval-Strausz, *Hotel: An American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 229.

<sup>50</sup> Michael D. Kinerk and Dennis W. Wilhelm, *Popcorn Palaces: The Art Deco Movie Theatre Paintings of Davis Cone* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 15.

provides insight into the grievances of movie-goers in 1922. His list of complaints includes: chewing gum under the seats, ice cream stains on the carpet, and the noisy consumption of peanuts.<sup>51</sup> While satirical, this column lends credence to exhibitors' claims, providing clear examples of the danger refreshments posed to expensive and ornate interiors.

While there may have been validity to exhibitors' apprehensions concerning the physical threat posed by refreshments, these were mere surface-level concerns. The picture palaces' refusal to allow food was more complex. The decision was more closely associated with concerns about the effect of refreshments on the picture palaces' highbrow image, rather than its expensive interiors. This view, which itself has become the dominant narrative within film exhibition scholarship, is succinctly summarised by Gomery: 'Popcorn and candy did not fit the "high class" image of the picture palace'.<sup>52</sup> In an attempt to legitimise film, exhibitors were not only emulating luxury hotels and department stores but were also hoping to align the picture palace with the high culture of European opera and theatre. The grand aesthetic of the buildings was, therefore, highly intentional. As Gomery has argued:

The movie-going public, with upper-middle class aspirations, delighted in these regally outfitted imitations of the grandest Old World halls and palaces. The association with the icons of European culture attracted the public for the splendour and design, as well as the attractions inside.<sup>53</sup>

By echoing the aesthetics and high culture of legitimate high-status entertainments, the fledgling film industry hoped that movie-going would become equally respectable as a pastime. 'The early movie palace, with its European styling and allusions to religious and dramatic themes', Valentine stated 'had been successful in lending an air of respectability to

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<sup>51</sup> Thomas J. Gray, 'Tommy's Tattles', *Variety*, 67:4, June 16, 1922, 11.

<sup>52</sup> Gomery, 'Film and Business History', 99.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

motion pictures through architectural connotations.’<sup>54</sup> Seen in some ways as a metaphorical osmosis, exhibitors hoped that sublime interiors would help to achieve this.

Cultivating a highbrow experience, picture palaces were engineered in this way with the intention to attract a particular class of patron, namely the middle- and upper-classes, spectators who would bring an air of greater respectability to the act of movie-going. Attempting to secure its own position as a highbrow pastime, the picture palace with its grand aesthetic and high level of service appealed particularly to those with aspirations towards upward social mobility. It is important here to note that the boundaries of social class were in a state of flux during the opening decades of the twentieth century, especially by the 1920s. This was a period of prosperity and social mobility and, as such, the lines between working- and middle-class became both unclear and ever-changing. As Steven J. Ross has described it:

Rising alongside the ‘old’ and ‘new’ middle class was a third group of low-level white-collar workers and service-sector employees whose class status remained unclear ... Working among the self-professed middle class but often living in working-class households and neighborhoods, these young men and women moved between two worlds.<sup>55</sup>

Perceptions of social class and identity were, for many Americans, particularly of the younger generation and in urban areas, growing increasingly ambiguous. The prosperity of the era meant that many – regardless of economic background – could improve their social standing and indulge in the flourishing consumer economy, purchasing goods but also attending movie-theatres frequently. By the early 1920s, the sharp class lines were blurring,

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<sup>54</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 51.

<sup>55</sup> Steven J. Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 14-15.

especially in America's urban areas, leading Ross to boldly pose the question: 'Did class even matter anymore?'<sup>56</sup>

Questions about social class within America at this time not only plague understanding of the period generally, but, have also led to debates about *who* exactly was attending the movie-theatre in its earliest years. A relative dark age, in regards to direct archival materials, currently there is no clear answer as to the audience demographic for the picture palace or the earlier nickelodeon. It was the latter which formed the focus of a prolonged debate between Robert C. Allen and Ben Singer. Played out in the pages of *Cinema Journal* in the mid-1990s, the two fiercely argued over exactly who was attending nickelodeons in Manhattan in the years following 1908: were audiences, as Allen advocated, becoming increasingly middle-class by the 1910s or, as Singer argued, was the traditional narrative of the nickelodeon as a dark, dingy, and distinctly working-class environment the true picture?<sup>57</sup>

With its short-lived heyday in the years between 1905 and 1915, the nickelodeon was the first permanent home of the motion picture. Originally a small operation of 50-250 seats, stores across the country were quickly and cheaply repurposed to fulfil this need: a bedsheet, as Andrea Kelley points out, could be hastily utilised to act as a makeshift screen.<sup>58</sup> Scholars have traditionally maintained that the nickelodeon was a space frequented primarily by the poorer sections of American society. In 1976, Russell Merritt analysed the composition of the nickelodeons' weekly audience and found that: 'A Russell Sage survey revealed that in 1911,

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>57</sup> Robert C. Allen, 'Motion Picture Exhibition in Manhattan 1906-1912: Beyond the Nickelodeon', *Cinema Journal*, 18:2 (Spring, 1979), 2-15, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1225438>; Ben Singer, 'Manhattan Nickelodeons: New Data on Audiences and Exhibitors', *Cinema Journal*, 34:3 (Spring, 1995), 5-35, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1225743>; Robert C. Allen, 'Manhattan Myopia; Or, Oh! Iowa!', *Cinema Journal*, 35:3 (Spring, 1996), 75-103, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1225767>; Ben Singer, 'New York, Just Like I Pictured It... Ben Singer Responds', *Cinema Journal*, 35:3 (Spring 1996), 104-128, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1225768>.

<sup>58</sup> Andrea J. Kelley, 'Bedsheet Cinema: The Materiality of the Segregating Screen', *Film History*, 31:3 (Fall, 2019), 5, <https://doi.org/10.2979/filmhistory.31.3.01>.

78 percent of the New York audience consisted of members “from the working class”.<sup>59</sup> It was this reading of the early exhibition model that Allen had earlier sought to revise in an article published in 1979. He argued that, from 1908, Manhattan’s nickelodeons were transitioning.<sup>60</sup> Using archival materials, specifically *Trow’s Business Directory*, to map the locations of nickelodeons, he found that these movie-theatres were increasingly located on the boundaries of – and often in – middle-class neighbourhoods.<sup>61</sup> Allen used his analysis of the archival materials and subsequent mapping to argue that the middle class were regularly frequenting movie-theatres from 1908. This is much earlier than the traditional historical narrative which is more inclined to see this turning point as occurring in 1914, with the opening of the Strand Theatre.

Responding (some years later) to this 1979 article, Singer mounted a prolonged attack on Allen’s revision of film exhibition in New York during the nickelodeon era.<sup>62</sup> Believing Allen to have overstated the frequency with which the middle classes were attending movie-theatres, he sided with the traditional reading: that the nickelodeon was inherently a working-class, specifically in the case of New York City a ‘new’ immigrant entertainment venue.<sup>63</sup> A protracted debate, involving the two scholars and others, continued for some time in *Cinema Journal*. Ultimately the conclusion drawn was that, to some extent, they were both right. A lack of primary archival materials means that the issue is in many ways the Schrödinger’s cat of American film exhibition: while it is likely that New York audiences during the 1910s were comprised of a mix of the two social classes, we cannot know for sure.<sup>64</sup> A somewhat unsatisfactory conclusion, this debate was nonetheless important, if only for highlighting

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<sup>59</sup> Russell Merritt, ‘Nickelodeon Theatres 1905-1914: Building an Audience for the Movies’, in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 63.

<sup>60</sup> Allen, ‘Motion Picture Exhibition’, 10.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 13.

<sup>62</sup> Singer, ‘Manhattan Nickelodeons’, 9, 12, 21-22.

<sup>63</sup> Singer, ‘New York, Just Like I Pictured It’, 105.

<sup>64</sup> Allen, ‘Manhattan Myopia’, 76, 78.

some of the difficulties of working on cinema's earliest period. It is referenced in this thesis because the same issues surround current understanding of the picture palaces' audience.

The grandeur and glamour of the picture palaces have led many scholars to assume that it was a venue frequented primarily by the middle and upper classes within society – an assumption that is seemingly supported by contemporary film trade press publications and eminent exhibitors like Franklin and Rothafel. Mouthpieces for the American film industry, they were committed to presenting the picture palace as a highbrow, refined and, importantly, *not* a working-class entertainment. It would, therefore, be easy to assume that the picture palace was very firmly a highbrow exhibition space open only to the respectable. While this is typically how it is presented, this interpretation reduces the picture palace (and its audience) to a one-dimensional view that likely incorporate inaccuracies. This is because, while it strove to be a refined entertainment, the picture palace was a space, that in theory, was open to anyone. Described as 'temples of a new classlessness' by Peter Stead, anyone who could afford the admission was welcome to attend – regardless of social class.<sup>65</sup>

It is worth noting, however, that the average ticket price at the picture palace was significantly more expensive than a lesser-run house. A ticket to attend a B&K picture palace on a Saturday night cost one dollar, in contrast to the 10 to 50 cents paid at a lesser-run venue.<sup>66</sup> In her study of Chicago, Lizabeth Cohen argues that while the working class were frequenting movie-theatres regularly during the 1920s, many visiting multiple times a week, but rather than the picture palaces the vast majority chose to frequent cheaper neighbourhood movie-theatres.<sup>67</sup> Other localised case studies undertaken by Thomas Doherty, Jeffrey Klenotic, and Roy Rosenzweig respectively support Cohen's claim.<sup>68</sup> Though not

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<sup>65</sup> Klenotic, "Four Hours of Hootin' and Hollerin", 130.

<sup>66</sup> Gomery, *Hollywood Studio System*, 25; Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood*, 182.

<sup>67</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, 'Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots: The Experience of Chicago Workers in the 1920s', *American Quarterly*, 41:1 (March, 1989), 13, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2713191>.

<sup>68</sup> Klenotic, "Four Hours of Hootin' and Hollerin", 132.

discriminatory in who could attend, the picture palace's high admission price suggests that members of the working class were probably not attending the picture palace on a regular basis.

A distinct lack of archival materials makes it difficult concretely to identify who was attending the movie-theatre, be that the nickelodeon or the picture palace, during the early twentieth century. The traditional narrative of the concession stand and picture palace that this chapter aims to revise in large part stems from a too selective view of this issue. Past scholars' interpretation of the state of film exhibition during the 1920s has perhaps been too influenced by the glamour of the picture palaces. While publicly advertised as a refined and high-class space, it remains to be seen whether that is the full story of this exhibition model. In regard to this thesis, however, it is perhaps not so much a question of who (referring to the social class) was attending the picture palace but, more pertinently, the class *mentality* that the exhibition space embodied that is central to understanding attitudes towards refreshments. While democratic spaces in relation to who could attend, they were also very much governed by middle-class ideals. Just as picture palace staff were trained to be attentive and respectful, audiences were conditioned to conform to specific behaviours and rules of decorum. The presence and consumption of refreshments, a distinctly working-class habit, fell outside of this accepted behaviour. 'As unthinkable as food in a church', there was no place for refreshments within the picture palace.<sup>69</sup>

### **A 'Cheap Way of Making a Theatre Look Cheaper': Working-Class Associations<sup>70</sup>**

Peanuts and popcorn were both popular snack foods at the turn of the twentieth century, but both held specific social connotations: they were indisputably working-class foods. They

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<sup>69</sup> Kinerk and Wilhelm, *Popcorn Palaces*, 15.

<sup>70</sup> Anon., '5<sup>th</sup> Ave. Stock', *Variety*, 69:13, February 15, 1923, 12.

were available at many popular working-class entertainments, including burlesque and baseball games. It was their association with the circus, however, which stigmatised them in the eyes of the urban middle class. In the opening years of the twentieth century, circuses were a hugely popular entertainment across America. These travelling entertainments brought much excitement to the towns they visited, and were known for the ‘novelty’ foods they sold: peanuts, popcorn, cotton candy and pink lemonade.<sup>71</sup> While not exclusively found in the big top, culturally these refreshments developed a strong association with circus culture. No figure embodied this connection more than the candy butcher.

Often a comedic character in film, the candy butcher was a well-known figure in society, though hardly well-loved. As the twentieth century progressed, candy butchers became increasingly controversial, their behaviour a demonstration of why exhibitors were so adamantly opposed to allowing refreshments in the picture palace. Candy butchers, usually male, hawked peanuts, candy, and popcorn. Operating on a candy privilege basis, it was at the circus that this first became a popular practice. For \$10 a week, management rented individuals the right to the concessions pitch – be it a popcorn tent, ice cream stall, or lemonade booth.<sup>72</sup> Candy privilege gave a candy butcher the monopoly within a venue, specifically the right to sell refreshments during the intermission or before the entertainment began. Unfortunately for most audiences, candy butchers did not abide by these rules. It was not uncommon, for instance, for them to continue to hawk their wares loudly throughout the evening’s programme. Not surprisingly, the majority of audiences – particularly the middle-class members – viewed them as a disruptive presence.

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<sup>71</sup> Janet Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>72</sup> Anon., ‘Concessions are Profitable’, *The Scranton Republican*, Scranton: Pennsylvania, March 18, 1906, 13, available from: <https://www.newspapers.com/image/48254844> [accessed March 3, 2021].

Throughout the 1920s, *Variety* was littered with articles discussing the nuisance of the candy butcher. In October 1925, for instance, the magazine reported on the removal of candy butchers from a Brooklyn theatre: ‘In an effort to metropolitanize his house Werba has ... thrown out the candy butchers who have long molested the comfort of patrons during intermissions in Brooklyn ... It is a mild sort of menace.’<sup>73</sup> The language used in this report is highly provocative. The use of words like ‘molest’ and ‘menace’ provide evidence of *Variety*’s distaste towards these figures. An earlier article from 1923 reporting on the removal of a candy butcher from a theatre in St. Louis, Missouri, reiterates this negative attitude. The article justifies his ejection, describing how the man had become a ‘general nuisance’ to patrons.<sup>74</sup> Trade press magazines, like *Variety*, provide considerable insight into Hollywood and the development of the film industry. Articles like those discussed here, however, also demonstrate how this publication acts as a barometer for gauging the attitudes of the American middle class, in many ways its target audience.

The opinions expressed in these articles seem severe, but should not simply be dismissed as an over-exaggeration. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that audiences not only openly disliked candy butchers but actively objected to their presence. Commenting in 1921 on the removal of candy butchers from Loew’s Hippodrome (a vaudeville theatre) in New York City, *Variety* noted that: ‘[Candy butchers] will be ousted July 16 ... Patrons have long protested at the concession, which permits the boys to inject their cries between acts and between shows.’<sup>75</sup> Audiences found candy butchers an annoyance, a negative presence in what was meant to be a fun or relaxing experience. Articles like this were not uncommon in *Variety*, but because of the nature of the magazine referred only to incidents within theatrical venues. It is clear from analysing local newspapers, however, that distaste towards hawkers

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<sup>73</sup> Arthur J. Busch, ‘Brooklyn, N. Y.’, *Variety*, 80:9, October 14, 1925, 51.

<sup>74</sup> John Ross, ‘St Louis’, *Variety*, 69:7, January 5, 1923, 32.

<sup>75</sup> Anon., *Variety*, 63:8, July 15, 1921, 25.

extended to other popular pastimes. Baseball spectators, for example, regularly contested their presence as they detracted from the game, often obscuring onlookers' view of the action.<sup>76</sup>

Not simply a nuisance, candy butchers also had a somewhat dubious reputation within society. A common complaint of visitors to carnivals and circuses was of being short-changed by them. *Variety* attributed this behaviour to circus workers being underpaid.<sup>77</sup> Unfortunately, this nefarious image transferred to other popular entertainments of the period. Reporting on a burlesque hall, *Variety* commented that: 'Referring to the candy hucksteresses who cavorted up and down the aisles offering mints at 35 cents before the performance began and the same mints at a quarter during the intermission.'<sup>78</sup> This candy butcher – a woman, in this instance – was looked on unfavourably by the publication. Her decision to capitalise on the greater demand at the beginning of the show seems a sensible business decision. It was not viewed this way by *Variety*, however. Reported on in an article entitled 'Stolen Sweets', the magazine regarded her actions as a blatant example of exploitation. Widely perceived within society to be swindlers, this was an image that candy butchers struggled to escape.

Trade press magazines were not only critical of candy butchers, but also of the venues which allowed them. A nuisance to audiences, they were also regarded as a marker of low class. Reporting in 1923 on theatres in Brooklyn and the presence of candy butchers, *Variety* made this scathing assessment: 'The management likely is standing for this cheap way of making a theatre look cheaper for the small piece of change it might receive for the privilege.'<sup>79</sup> Despite providing a small and often much-needed supplementary income for the

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<sup>76</sup> Anon., 'Chicago Writer Offers Suggestions', *Times Leader*, Wilkes-Bare: Pennsylvania, November 20, 1918, 15, available from: <https://www.newspapers.com/image/135546165> [accessed March 7, 2021].

<sup>77</sup> Anon., 'Carnivals Encourage Graft by Underpaying Workers', *Variety*, 68:12, November 10, 1922, 8.

<sup>78</sup> Anon., 'Stolen Sweets', *Variety*, 69:1, November 24, 1922, 16.

<sup>79</sup> Anon., '5<sup>th</sup> Ave. Stock', *Variety*, 69:13, February 15, 1923, 12.

exhibitors, it is clear that certain echelons of society and the film industry more generally regarded the candy butcher as a marker of tackiness. Reports published in the trade press gave the impression that vaudeville theatres and burlesque halls were over-run with these men, an image that did not endear them to the growing middle-class audience. Their presence further reinforced the view that such entertainments were disreputable and low-class.

The picture palace, billed as the epitome of luxury, would clearly not wish to be associated with such a controversial figure. The candy butcher represented everything that these deluxe movie-theatres were desperate to separate themselves from. It is clear why picture palaces would never allow a symbol of such contention and low class to tread their expensive carpets. Yet opposition to candy butchers does not fully account for why picture palaces were so vehemently against all refreshments.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the sale of peanuts, popcorn, and candy was a profitable enterprise. Stationed outside busy transport hubs, department stores, and entertainment venues, street vendors competed for custom. In Scranton, Pennsylvania, for example, there were so many vendors of roasted peanuts and popcorn competing outside of the Laurel Line train station that physical altercations between these men became a frequent fixture of town life.<sup>80</sup> As movie-going became increasingly popular in the 1910s, the movie-theatre became a new target for street vendors – in both major cities and small towns across America. Shops began to spring up close to movie-theatres, and photographs from the period show how pushcarts selling roasted peanuts and popcorn stationed themselves outside.<sup>81</sup> Movie-theatre audiences were, and continued to be, a captive market. These stalls and shops sought to capitalise upon this by targeting movie-goers before and after the show. In so

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<sup>80</sup> Anon., 'Angelo Did Not Like Competition', *The Scranton Republican*, Scranton: Pennsylvania, August 25, 1906, 3, available from: <https://www.newspapers.com/image/48230770> [accessed March 7, 2021].

<sup>81</sup> Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, 31.

doing, they reaped substantial profits. According to Andrew F. Smith, popcorn vendors working Chicago's main streets in 1907 made on average \$150 per week – a figure that rose substantially in subsequent years.<sup>82</sup> This was a lucrative market and, throughout the 1910s and 1920s, enterprising individuals were reaping the benefits. Why then, did the picture palaces not want to have a share in such profits?

The candy butcher was clearly not a suitable salesman, but exhibitors could easily have found other ways to incorporate the sale of refreshments which complemented the picture palace aesthetic. For instance, exhibitors could have prohibited eating within the auditorium, whilst allowing it within specific foyers or lounges within the movie-theatre, catering to patrons between shows. Embracing refreshments in this way would not have undermined the picture palaces' image. If anything, it would have added to the experience. Exhibitors would have retained complete control over the consumption of food within their walls, whilst also creating an extra source of income. The fact that they did not attempt to integrate food in some way is significant, indicative that their concerns about working-class associations ran deeper than simply a distaste for the candy butcher.

The candy butcher tarnished the reputation of the venues and entertainments where they worked, but the issues surrounding food consumption were much more complex. The sale of foods like peanuts, popcorn, and candy brought into question the class of a venue, but their consumption also appears to have insinuated something about the calibre of the audience itself. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, the press was increasingly opinionated about the reputation surrounding audiences that consumed food, focusing specifically on those attending lower-class entertainments and theatres. Unsurprisingly, film trade press magazines were vocally opposed to this practice. They were not, however, the only publications which were outspoken on the matter. Articles in national and local newspapers

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<sup>82</sup> Smith, *Popped Culture*, 82.

echoed these sentiments. A prime example comes from the *Times Leader*, a newspaper from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania:

The only audience in which it is good form to munch peanuts, candy and popcorn is the circus audience. Peanuts are a real part of the show – and shells dropped on the grass under the seat do not annoy future audiences. It is bad form to eat candy, fruit, nuts or any other form of refreshment in a theatre, at a concert, or in any public gathering. It looks undignified and disturbs those around us.<sup>83</sup>

Once again, the strong association between specific foods – peanuts, popcorn, and candy – and the circus is reiterated. Not only were these foods available but, more interestingly, the circus is presented as the *only* venue in which it was acceptable to consume them. The circus tent was a space in which it was okay to drop peanut shells and other mess on the floor. There is one key distinction between the circus and other popular entertainments which accounts for this attitude: the circus was a temporary structure and, therefore, it did not share the same concerns about mess and bad odours. This was an entertainment space which was constantly dismantled and reassembled, its fixtures and interior weathered and well-used, and with grass in lieu of carpet. It was by nature a very different space to other, more permanent entertainments and, as a result, had its own distinct rules and expectations with regard to audience behaviour.

It may have been ‘good form’ to eat at the circus, but the *Times Leader* makes it clear that it was ‘bad form’ to eat in any other entertainment spaces.<sup>84</sup> One of the reasons given focuses on the potential disturbance to other patrons. It is the final sentence of the passage, however, which appears the most significant. Eating within the public sphere is regarded not

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<sup>83</sup> Anon., ‘Good Form’, *Times Leader*, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, October 10, 1918, 8, available from: <https://www.newspapers.com/image/135538747> [accessed March 7, 2021].

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

only as ‘bad form’, but also as ‘undignified’.<sup>85</sup> The use of this word is significant because it replicates the picture palaces’ attitude towards eating, presumably echoing middle-class values more generally. It was only to be expected that *Variety* would have an opinion on this subject as it affected the film industry. That a newspaper in a Pennsylvanian town also felt the need to comment suggests that this was becoming a wider topic of debate in communities throughout America. There was a growing awareness – especially within the middle class – that there were certain expectations about audience behaviour, and that different venues and classes of entertainment had their own distinct rules.

Lawrence Levine and Richard Butsch have both written extensively about the changing nature of American audiences at the turn of the twentieth century, a gentrification process which extended beyond the movie-theatre. For much of the 1800s, theatre had been a raucous entertainment space. Largely working-class venues, audiences socialised, ate, and actively participated in the evening’s performance. By the 1870s, action was being taken to reform the reputation of American theatre, with the sole purpose of making it a respectable and highbrow entertainment.<sup>86</sup> A key component of this process was the application of middle-class rules of decorum and the cultivation of a passive audience. People were conditioned to behave in a particular way within this space, to sit in silence and quietly enjoy the evening’s entertainment. Outside of the period covered by this thesis, this is mentioned here because this gentrification process would later be replicated in the movie-theatre, as witnessed in the transition from nickelodeon to fledgling picture palace. By the 1910s, particularly in urban areas, movie-goers were being conditioned to be passive spectators.<sup>87</sup> Levine argued that the gentrification of audiences was part of a larger development, a

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences*, 96.

<sup>87</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 197.

widening divide between the public and private sphere within American society.<sup>88</sup> Eating, he argues, was one activity that had been ‘firmly removed from the public sphere’ by the 1910s.<sup>89</sup> It is this aspect of his argument, in particular, which could help to account for the picture palaces’ attitude towards both audience behaviour and eating. There is certainly a correlation between Levine’s argument and the manner in which publications, including both the *Times Leader* and film trade press magazines, viewed the consumption of refreshments within the movie-theatre space.

‘Undignified’, the term used by the *Times Leader*, is a more forgiving description than those published in *The Film Daily* and *Variety*. Throughout the 1920s, both publications had a preoccupation with lower-class entertainments, especially in urban areas: their accounts are in equal parts fascinated and appalled by the working-class movie-going experience. Allen describes how these types of reports were not uncommon during cinema’s early history, motivated largely by ‘a particular social (i.e. progressivist) agenda.’<sup>90</sup> There are two articles, taken from both ends of the decade, which perfectly capture this sentiment. The first comes from *Variety*, and recounts the writer’s experience of attending a show at the Plaza in Chicago in February 1920. Disorganised and highly chaotic, this was vastly different to the refined experience that the reporter was accustomed to. Discussing the audience’s behaviour, he recounted that:

Much freedom is accorded to the customers, who run up and down the aisles and exchange greetings of the season, borrow sandwiches from one another and otherwise make open house of the theatre. The young peanut vendors (with popcorn as a sideline) yodel an eternal obligate to all the acts. Every

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>90</sup> Allen, ‘Manhattan Myopia’, 80.

time the comedian propounds a gag, the vendor gives the answer: ‘Peanuts and popcorn.’<sup>91</sup>

Talking, eating, and freely roaming the auditorium, it is clear from this account that this audience was not subject to the same strict rules and expectations as those who attended the picture palace. This was not a unique example. A reporter from *The Film Daily* recalled much the same behaviours in his visit to a theatre on the Lower East Side of New York, almost a decade later, in November 1929. Perfectly capturing the chaotic nature of the working-class movie-going experience, the writer commented that it was:

just chuck full of atmosphere any afternoon you want to wander in. Up and down the aisles wanders a ‘butcher’ shouting out louder than Richard Dix on the screen: ‘Popcorn, peanuts, ice cre-eeam!’ ... The plump matron alongside you has a three-year-old child on her lap. The kid’s feet rest on your knees and the feeding bottle slips and covers your nice blue suit with Grade G milk ... Nobody pays any attention to anybody else. Everything is free and easy.<sup>92</sup>

Despite occurring in different cities and almost a decade apart, these articles perfectly complement each other: they describe identical experiences. Importantly for this thesis, both indicate that food was an important component of urban working-class movie-going.

Refreshments were both brought to the cinema but also sold on site and, crucially, people were eating throughout the entertainment.

The candy butcher is a prominent feature of both accounts. Loud and disruptive, they did not just sell food but are also described as inadvertently interacting with the performance. These accounts support claims that, despite only being authorised to operate during intermissions and breaks in the programme, they hawked their wares regardless of what was

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<sup>91</sup> Anon., ‘Plaza, Chicago’, *Variety*, 57:11, February 6, 1920, 26.

<sup>92</sup> Phil M. Daly, ‘And That’s That’, *The Film Daily*, 50:46, November 22, 1929, 8.

occurring on stage or screen. Another point to highlight is that the earlier article details the vendor selling peanuts ‘with popcorn as a sideline’.<sup>93</sup> Technological advances within the field of peanut roasters and popcorn machine manufacturing meant that both were available at the turn of the twentieth century, but it was roasted peanuts that initially proved most popular. It was not until 1917 that this began to shift. The transition from large gas-powered popcorn wagons to small electric-powered indoor popcorn machines was a technological development which would later result in popcorn’s dominance within entertainment venues.<sup>94</sup>

These articles reveal details about the practices and customs surrounding food consumption, but also the audience’s behaviour more generally. The writers of these pieces did not attend these venues to comment on that day’s show or performance, but instead to observe the audience. They were the spectacle on display. Adopting a patronising tone, both reporters observed and meticulously documented the behaviour of these working-class audiences. Allowed freely to wander the auditorium, eat, talk, and shout, the working-class movie-going experience appeared unfamiliar and unsettling to these middle-class observers.

Such working-class movie-theatres held an additional layer of interest for some. Many were also ethnic movie-theatres – a factor that is alluded to in both articles. *The Film Daily*’s account was subtler in its approach, highlighting the accents of the movie-goers. Describing an encounter between himself and the woman sat beside him, the reporter emphasised her heavily accented English: ‘Oxcoose it pleeze’.<sup>95</sup> *Variety*, in contrast, was not as nuanced. The article’s description of the Plaza’s audience was explicit: ‘Every nationality represented in the League of Nations is represented in the Saturday night audience.’<sup>96</sup> This description permitted no illusions: the people attending this movie-theatre were not American-born.

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<sup>93</sup> Anon., ‘Plaza, Chicago’, *Variety*, 57:11, February 6, 1920, 26.

<sup>94</sup> Cretors Family with Richard Hagle, *C. Cretors & Co.: 125 Years* (Chicago: Racom Communications, 2013), 3.

<sup>95</sup> Phil M. Daly, ‘And That’s That’, *The Film Daily*, 50:46, November 22, 1929, 8.

<sup>96</sup> Anon., ‘Plaza, Chicago’, *Variety*, 57:11, February 6, 1920, 26.

Aside from these written accounts, the locations of both movie-theatres also reveal the nationalities of their clientele. Located in the Lower East Side of New York City and Lower West Side of Chicago respectively, both catered primarily to immigrant audiences. Both reporters use the ethnicity of these movie-goers to account for their uncouth behaviour. There is a strong case to make, therefore, that the picture palaces' rejection of refreshments was much more complex than just concerns about mess and working-class associations. It could, instead, also be a product of the wider prejudice and xenophobia permeating many of America's metropolitan centres at this time.

### **'They Gossip and Eat Sunflower Seeds': Eastern European Immigration and Culture<sup>97</sup>**

The turn of the twentieth century was an era marked by increased industrialisation, urbanisation, and mass immigration, during which the United States underwent a dramatic transformation that impacted many aspects of society. As historian Judith Thissen has noted, the consequences of this were far-reaching, 'profoundly transforming the nation's social, cultural, and political landscape, challenging established norms and values.'<sup>98</sup> In the space of a few decades, the social fabric of America underwent a dramatic change, one which challenged the very notion of what it was to be 'American'. Nowhere was this truer than in America's major metropolitan hubs, cities like Chicago and New York, both home to unusually high concentrations of picture palaces.

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<sup>97</sup> Judith Thissen, 'Early Cinema and the Public Sphere of the Neighbourhood Meeting Hall: The Long Durée of Working-Class Sociability', in *Beyond the Screen: Institutions, Networks and Publics of Early Cinema*, ed. Marta Braun, Charlie Keil, Rob King, Paul Moore, and Louis Pelletier (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2012), 304.

<sup>98</sup> Judith Thissen, 'Education or Entertainment?: Early Cinema as a Social Force in New York's Immigrant Jewish Community', in *Screen Culture and the Social Question, 1880-1914*, ed. Ludvig Vogl-Bienek and Richard Crangle (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 149.

Millions of immigrants from Europe and the wider world flooded to America's shores on an unprecedented scale between 1850 and 1930. Their arrival came in two distinct phases: from the 1840s, the first wave arrived from Northern and Western Europe, followed by a secondary wave from Southern and Eastern Europe beginning in the 1880s. It had been immigration from Germany, Ireland, and Scandinavia which had dominated much of the nineteenth century, but by the 1890s movement from these areas had diminished. In their place came an influx of migrants from Italy, Russia, and Eastern Europe.<sup>99</sup> A significant turning point in the history of mass immigration to America, this was not a shift that was regarded favourably by many native-born Americans.

The Dillingham Commission, tasked by Congress in 1907 to investigate immigration, drew an acute distinction between the two waves of immigration. Those from Northern and Western Europe, described by the Commission as the 'old' immigration, were principally made up of families looking to start a new life in America. Hard-working, Christian, and committed to permanently residing in America, 'old' immigrants were deemed desirable.<sup>100</sup> In stark contrast 'new' immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe were not viewed in such a favourable light. Characterised by the Dillingham Commission as largely male, unskilled, and transient, 'new' immigrants seemingly had little of value to offer American society.<sup>101</sup> Lacking their predecessors' farming skills, many chose to settle in heavily urbanised areas.<sup>102</sup> This was particularly true of New York, the main point of entry at this time. Eastern Europeans, for example, accounted for a quarter of the city's population by 1910.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Leonard Dinnerstein and David Reimers, *Ethnic Americans: A History of Immigration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., 2009), 56-57.

<sup>100</sup> Maldwyn A. Jones, *American Immigration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1992), 152.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Dinnerstein and Reimers, *Ethnic Americans*, 61.

<sup>103</sup> Judith Thissen, 'Education or Entertainment?', 149-150.

The millions of immigrants that came to America in the hopes of beginning a new life did not come as tabula rasa. They brought with them a myriad of different cultures, languages, customs, and religions. Challenging the established and traditional American norm, all of these factors would contribute to the creation of a complex new cultural landscape. As Maldwyn A. Jones noted new immigrants ‘preference for urban life gave American cities a strongly foreign flavor. By 1910 one-third of the population of the twelve largest cities was foreign-born and another third was made up of the children of immigrants.’<sup>104</sup> The streets of major cities rapidly filled with the people and cultural traditions of many different nationalities. Not one cohesive group, immigrants had to adapt to each other as well as the established American status quo.

As the descriptions of the ethnic cinemas published in the trade press magazines demonstrate, immigrant communities were viewed as a spectacle by the urban middle class. Their lives in the ghettos appeared a world away from the elegant department stores and picture palaces of Manhattan and, therefore, were regarded as a source of curiosity. This style of reporting was not new. For decades, journalists and social reformers had been reporting on life within the tenements. Published in 1890, Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* is an example of this, but certainly not the only one.<sup>105</sup> As Thissen comments, in the decades following 1890 ‘progressive reformers and city officials published dozens of reports on the district’s [referring to New York City] social problems, ranging from child labor, poor living conditions to the allegedly corrupting influence of cheap amusements like commercial dance halls and variety shows.’<sup>106</sup> While

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<sup>104</sup> Maldwyn A. Jones, *The Limits of Liberty: American History 1607-1992* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1995), 321.

<sup>105</sup> Jacob A. Riis, *How The Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons: 1890).

<sup>106</sup> Judith Thissen, ‘Beyond the Nickelodeon: Cinemagoing, Everyday Life and Identity Politics’, in *Audiences: Defining and Researching Screen Entertainment Reception*, ed. Ian Christie (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 47.

assimilation proved easier in subsequent decades, some ethnic groups were still viewed as ‘other’ during the 1920s. This was particularly true of Eastern Europeans.

A large percentage of those from Eastern Europe (approximately 43 percent) were not Christian but Jewish – the majority, staunchly orthodox.<sup>107</sup> Their religion dictated not only their religious beliefs but also their wider culture and lifestyle. One manifestation of this was that many continued to speak their native language, Yiddish. During the 1910s and 1920s, therefore, Eastern European Jews walked a fine line: a source of fascination, they were also the cause of much anxiety within American society (specifically for the urban middle class). Articles in both *Variety* and *The Film Daily* capture this feeling: the audience is a source of considerable interest, but their behaviour is also deemed unsettling. Eating and talking are common behaviours in both accounts and, as Butsch has described in his history of American audiences, these socialising activities were ‘mistaken by the righteous and respectable as rowdyism ... a hallmark of almost all ethnic theaters’.<sup>108</sup> Rowdy is an apt description. Both trade press reporters described a scene that was highly chaotic, by middle-class standards. Commenting specifically on the experience of visiting ethnic cinemas, the behaviours described belonged to a wider sphere of Eastern European culture and the use of community spaces.

Since the late nineteenth century, meeting halls had become an important resource for Eastern European communities. These were spaces with a multitude of uses: venues for celebrations, meeting rooms, communal dining rooms, and makeshift synagogues.<sup>109</sup> But while meeting halls continued to be important social and communal spaces, from the turn of the twentieth century the location of some of these activities shifted. As entertainments like Yiddish theatre, dance halls, and cinema became increasingly popular, these entertainment

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<sup>107</sup> Jones, *American Immigration*, 173.

<sup>108</sup> Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences*, 10.

<sup>109</sup> Thissen, ‘Early Cinema and the Public Sphere’, 299.

venues took on a social role within the community.<sup>110</sup> In the case of movie-theatres, this seems particularly true for women. Commenting on ethnic cinemas in 1908, one newspaper article reported that these theatres took on a different purpose during the day: ‘As most customers are women and children, it resembles very much the women’s section in a synagogue. They gossip and eat sunflower seeds.’<sup>111</sup> A safe space, movie-theatres were the perfect place for women to socialise. Their children could play, and they were free to talk, share food, and eat. Not subject to American middle-class rules of decorum, these venues fostered such behaviours. Thissen has described how food – both the sale and consumption of – was a well-established component of Jewish entertainment culture, referring to cinema but also other earlier venues, for instance, music halls.<sup>112</sup> Candy privilege provided movie exhibitors with a small supplementary income, and patrons enjoyed consuming refreshments alongside a film. Seeming to do little to capture the audience’s attention, as demonstrated in cinema trade press articles, the film itself become somewhat inconsequential. Relaxed and informal, movie-theatres became valuable social spaces for Eastern European communities, especially in metropolitan areas. Gentrification had eradicated many of these behaviours from the movie-theatres and vaudeville halls frequented by the urban middle class. Regarded as rowdy and chaotic by the urban middle class, therefore, ethnic cinemas appeared the antithesis of the picture palace.

### **‘Prejudice and Fear’: The Picture Palace as a Conduit for Wider Xenophobia?’<sup>113</sup>**

Since the 1850s, relations between migrant groups and native-born Americans had, at times, been strained. The differences in religion, language, and cultural heritage often led to tension.

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<sup>110</sup> Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences*, 134.

<sup>111</sup> Thissen, ‘Early Cinema and the Public Sphere’, 304.

<sup>112</sup> Thissen, ‘Beyond the Nickelodeon’, 58.

<sup>113</sup> Jones, *The Limits of Liberty*, 323.

During the middle years of the nineteenth century, for example, riots broke out in cities across the East Coast, as the largely Protestant American public protested against the presence of Irish Catholics.<sup>114</sup> As these riots indicate, ‘old’ migrants had been met with resistance, but during the early twentieth century ‘new’ migrants were met with even greater hostility. Settling within conclaves enabled ‘new’ immigrants to maintain their native cultures and heritage but also served to isolate them further from the native-born population, reinforcing their distinctly foreign status and leading to speculation about their ‘different’ character.<sup>115</sup>

American paranoia intensified in the face of the increasing immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe. This prejudice manifested in a number of ways: for example, Eastern Europeans became targets of anti-Semitic attacks and racial stereotyping. The root of this American anxiety can be explained, as Jones has suggested, by the perceived change in the character of immigration from the 1880s onwards:

The ‘new’ immigrants came from the more backward parts of Europe and were generally poorer, less skilled, and less literate than the ‘old’. Most of them, too, were strangers to democracy and representative government. Americans began to doubt whether people so alien could ever be successfully assimilated. Prejudice and fear intensified nativist hostility. There was widespread alarm about immigrant radicalism, especially after the conviction of foreign anarchists for the Haymarket bomb outrage in 1886.<sup>116</sup>

The Haymarket riot was a violent event in Chicago’s history. It began as a peaceful demonstration on behalf of striking workers but, when a bomb was thrown at the police, a riot resulted in which unemployed German and Irish immigrants confronted the police and

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<sup>114</sup> Lisa Krissoff Boehm and Steven H. Corey, *America’s Urban History* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 154-155.

<sup>115</sup> Jones, *The Limits of Liberty*, 322.

<sup>116</sup> Jones, *The Limits of Liberty*, 323.

several people were killed on both sides. Although the riot grew from tensions relating to labour relations, it exposed wider fears within urban society.<sup>117</sup>

The Haymarket Riot is mentioned here because, as Alan M. Kraut has noted, it had a significant impact on the perception of immigrants within society: ‘The terrible legacy of the Haymarket riot trials [of eight anarchists accused of the bombing] were associated in many American minds with the organized labour movement, immigrant workers, and dangerous wild-eyed radicals and anarchists.’<sup>118</sup> Casting a long shadow, the Haymarket affair inspired renewed scrutiny of the loyalties and political standing of immigrants – especially those from Eastern Europe – in subsequent decades. While the vast majority were not radicals, anarchists, or communists, that a minority could be was unsettling to sections of the native-born American public.<sup>119</sup> This anxiety was only heightened by the Russian Revolution in 1917, and reinforced by the Palmer Raids. Between 1919 and 1920, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, hoping to strengthen his presidential ambitions, led an anti-radical crusade against left-wing organisations. During the country’s first ‘Red Scare’, American authorities under Palmer’s leadership arrested over 6,000 people and, subsequently, deported 600 suspected communists to Russia.<sup>120</sup>

American prejudice and paranoia had been steadily building from the late 1890s, especially in urban areas, but it was only after World War I that it finally reached boiling point. As Hugh Brogan has commented: ‘What may be called the cultural panic of the post-war period expressed itself ... in noisier and noisier assertions of American superiority and in a dread of foreign infiltration.’<sup>121</sup> The main way that this manifested itself was in tighter

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<sup>117</sup> Roger Daniels, ‘Two Cheers for Immigration’, in *Debating American Immigration, 1882-Present*, ed. Roger Daniels and Otis L. Graham (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 14.

<sup>118</sup> Alan M. Kraut, *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1982), 89.

<sup>119</sup> Jones, *American Immigrants*, 196.

<sup>120</sup> Jones, *The Limits of Liberty*, 433; Jason Scott Smith, *A Concise History of the New Deal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 12.

<sup>121</sup> Hugh Brogan, *The Penguin History of the USA* (London: Penguin Books, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2001), 496.

controls on the movement of people. For much of the nineteenth century, immigration into the United States had occurred with limited regulation. Restrictions had been in place since 1882, for example, which barred entry into the country for a number of undesirables (for example, paupers and convicts). The list grew in 1907 to include prostitutes, anarchists, and those suffering from contagious diseases.<sup>122</sup> The growing anxiety which manifested itself from the 1910s and culminated in America's increasing isolationism following World War I marked the beginning of greater hostility and regulation during the 1920s. Robert S. McElvaine has described this as a period defined by its 'fanatical patriotism', years in which anyone that had 'a hint of "internationalism"' came under increasing scrutiny.<sup>123</sup>

Following the introduction of literacy tests in 1917, it was in the post-war years that stricter regulation was enforced with the passing of a number of anti-immigration laws, which sought to limit the number of immigrants from specific countries.<sup>124</sup> The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 was the first. Imposing a limit of 357,000 immigrants a year, it established quotas for each national group at 3 percent based on figures from the 1910 census.<sup>125</sup> The later Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 was more severe, utilising the earlier census of 1890 as the basis for quotas in order to place even greater restrictions on immigration, especially movement from Southern and Eastern Europe.<sup>126</sup> By the late 1920s, the mass immigration of the previous decades had slowed considerably. America's increasing isolationism in the aftermath of World War I was an important motivating factor. As Kraut has suggested, however, it was the 'catalyst not a cause' for stricter regulation.<sup>127</sup> Decades of long-standing anxiety and prejudice had built to this. American xenophobia towards immigrants, especially

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<sup>122</sup> Jones, *The Limits of Liberty*, 324.

<sup>123</sup> Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 12.

<sup>124</sup> Daniels, 'Two Cheers' 14-15.

<sup>125</sup> Jones, *The Limits of Liberty*, 439.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Kraut, *The Huddled Masses*, 172.

those from Eastern Europe, bled into all aspects of urban society – so why not also the picture palace?

Located largely in metropolitan centres, picture palaces were in the epicentres of American migration. Articles published in the trade press magazines demonstrate how the urban middle class were equal parts fascinated and horrified by accounts of ethnic cinemas, particularly those frequented by Eastern Europeans, in which refreshments were an integral component. Unfamiliar from their own movie-going experiences, the behaviours described in *Variety* and *The Film Daily* played into larger concerns of the American-born population, notably anxiety and prejudice surrounding the mass influx of immigrants. It seems plausible that the picture palaces' rejection of food, especially during the early 1920s, stemmed at least to some extent from these wider tensions within American society, especially considering the picture palaces' primary target audience: the urban American middle class. Offering expensive furnishings, impressive architecture, and impeccable service, this was not an experience which exhibitors would allow to be tainted by any unsavoury associations with working-class or immigrant cultures. Is it accurate, however, to apply this narrative universally to film exhibition across America?

## **Part II: Looking Past the Picture Palace**

### **'Hardly Metropolises': Urban versus Rural<sup>128</sup>**

Large film exhibition spaces like Roxy's Capital in New York City were rare, the exception rather than the rule. Comprising only 5 percent of the nation's movie-theatres between 1913 and 1933, this exhibition model was not representative of the movie-going experience enjoyed by the vast majority of Americans during the 1920s.<sup>129</sup> Despite being very few in

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<sup>128</sup> Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, 3.

<sup>129</sup> Klenotic, "Four Hours of Hootin' and Hollerin", 132.

overall number, the picture palace has long dominated accounts of film exhibition from this period. The innate extravagance of this exhibition model partly accounts for this, as does its location and profitability.

While picture palaces could be found in many major American cities throughout the 1920s, it was on the East Coast that they were most common. This is significant because at this time the East Coast (specifically New York City) was the cultural hub of America. Film production had largely made a permanent move to the West Coast during the 1910s, but New York still had an important connection to the film industry. It was there, for example, in the 1920s and 1930s that the major Hollywood studios first showcased their newest films at the deluxe movie-theatres located on and around Broadway.<sup>130</sup> Important not only to the fledgling film industry but also Broadway and vaudeville, New York City garnered significant attention from film trade press magazines. Invaluable and deserving of study, it is important to acknowledge that materials relating to the picture palace and the wider metropolitan movie-going experience, however, represent only one-part of the total picture.

As Robert C. Allen has noted: ‘Keeping the metropolitan experience of moviegoing at the center of our historical map of American cinema squashes a complex and dynamic cultural and social geography into a simplistic binary grid of city/country.’<sup>131</sup> The dominance of the picture palace within scholarship derives from an earlier tradition within film studies, one which favoured the metropolitan and urban experience. This approach was heavily biased, skewing many scholars’ understanding of film exhibition, especially during cinema’s early history. A fundamental truth of American film exhibition that needs to be recognised is that there was no universal movie-going experience. The size and diversity of the country made that impossible. The current scholarly consensus on the concession stand during the

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<sup>130</sup> Allen, ‘Decentering Historical Audience Studies’, 20-21.

<sup>131</sup> Allen, ‘Race, Region, and Rusticity’, 29.

1920s requires drastic revision because it overlooks this diversity. This consensus originated principally in the work of Gomery, who linked the prohibition of refreshments specifically to the picture palaces.<sup>132</sup> It was in the work of subsequent scholars that this was misconstrued, with Gomery's interpretation being taken out of context and universally applied to all film exhibition during the decade. Greatly impacting scholarly understanding of the concession stand's development, this consensus illuminates the dangers of regarding film exhibition as one neat and universal picture.

In recent decades a number of scholars, including Allen but also Fuller-Seeley and Waller, have attempted to redress the metropolitan bias within film scholarship. Looking outside New York City and other major cities, their research calls attention to film exhibition in a variety of communities across America. Investigating small towns and rural areas, these scholars hope to rebalance the historical narrative. This is important because, as Fuller-Seeley argues: 'In the earliest years of film exhibition in the United States, motion pictures seemed largely an urban phenomenon ... [but] the movies were never solely an urban experience ... as much a small-town phenomenon as an urban one.'<sup>133</sup> A product of urban bias, the picture palace has long been regarded as definitive of the movie-going experience during the 1920s, despite New York City accounting for only 25 percent of American movie-goers.<sup>134</sup> Since the palaces were relatively few in number and located in major metropolises and cities, the vast majority of Americans did not consume film within such lavish surroundings.

It is important to highlight here that even *within* urban and metropolitan areas, film exhibition was diverse. Not every movie-theatre in New York City during the 1920s was a picture palace. And New York itself was vastly different from other communities across America – a fact that underpins much of Allen's argument in his 1996 response to Singer,

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<sup>132</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 79.

<sup>133</sup> Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, ix-x.

<sup>134</sup> Fuller, "You Can Have the Strand", 89.

during their debate about Manhattan nickelodeons during the 1910s. ‘Some important work on early local exhibition has been done since my [original 1979] essay,’ Allen noted, ‘and for the most part it underscores just how unlike the Manhattan exhibition situation most other cities and towns were.’<sup>135</sup> Approximately 46 million people were attending American movie-theatres each week by 1925, so if not at the picture palace where were Americans also watching films?<sup>136</sup> In truth, this is a complex question to answer.

Heavily industrialised and with mass migration drawn both from the countryside and abroad to its bustling cities, America emerged in the early twentieth century as a global economic powerhouse. Urbanisation was a key characteristic of this period, something which radically transformed the social make-up of the country throughout the twentieth century. The 1920s census seemingly supports this statement as it found America’s population to be 50 percent urban, a figure which was significantly larger than censuses in preceding decades.<sup>137</sup> Viewed in isolation, the findings of this census present one image of the decade, but it is an image which can be deceiving to the modern eye. Today the term ‘urban’ is used by the U.S. census to describe a town with a population greater than 50,000; in 1920 it referred to a town of 2,500 or more.<sup>138</sup> Over the last hundred years what constitutes ‘urban’ has changed significantly. It is important to acknowledge this because, as Fuller-Seeley has observed, small towns of 2,500 are ‘hardly metropolises’ by modern standards.<sup>139</sup> A small town in Nebraska, for example, may have been categorised as urban, but it was a world away from a major city, such as Boston. It is for this reason that this thesis refers to New York and Chicago as metropolises, a term used to refer to a city with a population of at least 100,000,

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<sup>135</sup> Allen, ‘Manhattan Myopia’, 96.

<sup>136</sup> Douglas Gomery, *The Coming of Sound: A History* (London: Routledge, 2005), 10.

<sup>137</sup> Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, 3.

<sup>138</sup> Allen, ‘Manhattan Myopia’, 96; McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 19; United States Census Bureau, ‘Urban and Rural’, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html> [accessed March 3, 2021].

<sup>139</sup> Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, 3.

their size differentiating them from other urbanised areas.<sup>140</sup> While labelled ‘urban’ by the census, the reality was that America remained fairly rural in 1920 – with 75 percent of the population residing in small towns and rural areas.<sup>141</sup> Looking past the metropolitan movie-going experience, it was in these locales that the majority of Americans watched films.

Small towns may not have been as bustling as larger cities, but movie-theatres were still an integral part of everyday life. By 1910, every town in America with a population of 5,000 or more had at least one nickelodeon, and the number rose significantly as the 1920s progressed.<sup>142</sup> Not as grand or luxurious as the picture palace, small-town movie-theatres were still an important component of the film exhibition industry. Importantly, unlike the picture palaces, class was less of a controlling factor in small-town exhibition. ‘What is striking about early exhibition in small-town America’, Allen comments is ‘... the degree to which these venues were *not* class-segregated but rather places where people of different classes met and mingled.’<sup>143</sup> The distinction between rural/small town versus urban is important, and needs to be acknowledged when discussing film exhibition. Given America’s size and diverse population, however, it is necessary to consider additional factors. Fuller-Seeley has succinctly outlined a number of these:

... outside the largest urban centers, there was a regional flavour to small-town moviegoing. Audience composition, patrons’ access to theaters, and frequency of attendance varied from one portion of the country to another. Geography and settlement patterns, and restrictions due to racial and ethnic prejudice, poverty, local customs shaped by religious beliefs, and expectations about gender roles and social class, determined who went to the movies and how often.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Allen, ‘Race, Region, and Rusticity’, 28.

<sup>141</sup> Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, 3.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>143</sup> Allen, ‘Manhattan Myopia’, 96.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

Film exhibition practices and experiences varied considerably in different regions, for a range of different reasons. It would be impossible to cover the full breadth of America within this thesis but, wherever possible, examples have been used to demonstrate regional variation. Rural versus urban (and wider factors related to geographical region) are important, but another critical distinction relates to the mechanisms of the film exhibition industry itself: studio-owned or affiliated versus independent.

### **Empire Building: Studio-Owned versus Independent**

Just as location created variation in American film exhibition, diversity in the different types of movie-theatre ownership and operation also played a significant role. Waller captures this differentiation in his discussion of the transition to sound in the late 1920s:

... as of July 1, 1930, more than 10,000 of the estimated 14,500 'legitimate motion picture houses' ... in the United States were equipped for sound. Of the sound-equipped theaters, 6,796 were independently owned; 2,252 were 'controlled by producer-owned chains' (Publix, Fox, Warner Brothers, RKO, Loew); and 1,213 were controlled by 'independent circuits.'<sup>145</sup>

Waller's account of this crucial event in American film exhibition history highlights the three distinct types of movie-theatre ownership at this time: studio-owned (and affiliated) exhibition chains, independent regional exhibition chains, and independent exhibitors (often with one or only a few holdings). While the lines between these categories did at times blur, it is critical when discussing American film exhibition to acknowledge the distinction between studio-owned and independent because the two operated very differently.

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<sup>145</sup> Waller, 'Imagining and Promoting the Small-Town Theater', 170.

It is studio-owned and affiliated exhibition chains which have traditionally received the greatest attention in scholarship. In his book analysing the history of the Hollywood Studio System, Gomery describes the wealth of archival material for this exhibition type as ‘overwhelming’.<sup>146</sup> The relationship shared by certain exhibition chains and the major Hollywood studios accounts for this privileged position, as did their size and scope. With the financial backing of the largest film studios, exhibition chains like Publix had the means to dominate American film exhibition, and thereby also trade press reporting. At the beginning of the 1920s, the majority of exhibition chains had been regional (for example, B&K in Chicago and Loew’s in New York City) but, as the Hollywood studio system grew, many circuits were consolidated within the studio-owned exhibition chains. As a result, by the late 1920s the major Hollywood studios controlled growing exhibition empires of hundreds of movie-theatres each, across growing regional territories.<sup>147</sup>

Studio-owned exhibition chains, with the financial backing of New York-based investment banks, were not acquiring just any movie-theatre.<sup>148</sup> They favoured and competed for the monopoly over a specific type: the nation’s deluxe houses. Paramount provides a prime example of this. By the early 1920s, Adolph Zukor, founder and mastermind of Paramount Pictures, had recognised that it was not enough to dominate film production and distribution. It was also essential to have movie-theatres for these films to be shown in. In 1921, the studio owned 300 movie-theatres, a number that rapidly grew in the years following – by 1930, it owned 1,000 movie-theatres.<sup>149</sup> Gomery outlines the path, undertaken from 1923, that helped Paramount to achieve this:

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<sup>146</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 5.

<sup>147</sup> Gomery, ‘Film and Business History’, 98.

<sup>148</sup> Lee Grieveson, *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations: Media, Capital, and the Liberal World System* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 3.

<sup>149</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 18.

The onslaught of acquisitions that started with the Los Angeles theatre (bought for \$2 million in March 1923) staggered the imagination ... In the space of a couple of months, Zukor acquired the San Francisco theatres of Herbert Rothchild, the Wilmer and Vincent Circuit of Pennsylvania, and Newman's Kansas City theatres. In addition, on 8 July 1925 he announced a \$20 million theatre-building programme that would result in the construction of twenty-two new houses. He was simply out to corner the first-run picture palace market in the USA. And he did.<sup>150</sup>

Zukor's greatest acquisition, however, was B&K in 1925. At the time of its sale in 1925, B&K was making more money than any other exhibition chain operating within America.<sup>151</sup> This was one reason for Zukor's determination to obtain it, the other being Sam Katz. Katz (alongside Abraham Balaban) had built the Chicagoan exhibition empire, and it was their movie-theatres which became the blueprint for the picture palace exhibition model, the grandeur of their movie-theatres rivalling that of Rothafel's.<sup>152</sup> In 1925 Katz agreed to manage Paramount's exhibition branch from a central headquarters located in New York City.<sup>153</sup> Having operated under several different monikers in the preceding years, it was following this acquisition that Paramount's exhibition chain reached its final form. Paramount-Publix (referred to throughout this thesis as Publix) as it was now called, would in the following years become the largest and most influential exhibition chain operating in America.

By 1930, Hollywood's "Big 5" (the collective term used to refer to the largest Hollywood studios) had all built sizeable movie-theatre empires. 'Paramount owned the most theatres (about 1,000), principally in the Middle West and South,' Gomery notes, 'Loew's had the least (about 200) with its houses mainly in and around New York City. Fox, Warners

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>151</sup> Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood*, 182.

<sup>152</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 54-56.

<sup>153</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 21.

and RKO owned between 300 and 500 each.<sup>154</sup> In that year, it was these exhibition chains (with the addition of Columbia and United Artists) which took 70 per cent of the box office revenues.<sup>155</sup> While the studio-owned exhibition chains collected movie-theatres of ‘every character and every description’, it was their monopoly on the nation’s deluxe first-run movie-theatres that helped to account for their impressive revenue.<sup>156</sup> As Gomery has written:

*Motion Picture News* found in 1926 that, on average, over 51 percent of each week’s audience was recorded in the 3,300 first run theatres in the 79 cities with populations over 100,000. In other words, one-half of the audience went to one-fifth of the theaters.<sup>157</sup>

With the picture palaces among their holdings, the studio-owned exhibition chains controlled the largest, grandest, and most profitable movie-theatres. This was not the only element which they held the monopoly over, however.

The Hollywood studio system which emerged during this period was characterised by its vertical integration. By the mid-1920s, film production, distribution, and exhibition lay principally in the hands of Hollywood’s Big 5. The system of vertical integration created a power vacuum, one which enabled these studios to monopolise the American film industry. In regards to film exhibition, this meant that it was the major film studios who had total control over who could exhibit their films, and when. What emerged as a result of this was the creation of a run-zone system, which naturally favoured the studio-owned exhibition chains and disadvantaged smaller independents.

A hierarchical distribution and exhibition system, it worked as Waller has described: ‘The run-zone-clearance system maximised profits by maintaining the distinction between

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>155</sup> Donahue, *American Film Distribution*, 21.

<sup>156</sup> Anon., ‘With Sam Katz in New England’, *Publix Opinion*, 2:16, March 12, 1928, 6.

<sup>157</sup> Gomery, *The Coming of Sound*, 10.

first-run and subsequent-run theaters, organizing distribution according to geographic locations – or “zones” – and establishing “clearance” times between different runs.<sup>158</sup> The system effectively meant that picture palaces and other deluxe movie-theatres had first access to the newest releases, and in the subsequent weeks and months these films would then be made available to other movie-theatres: first run houses, then second/third run movie-theatres, and eventually fourth/fifth run venues. The latter were usually small independents, who, as Gomery acknowledged, had to ‘scramble for bookings.’<sup>159</sup> The further down the run, the longer it took for a movie-theatre to have access to a film. Receiving a film many months after its initial release had many disadvantages, including the quality of the film itself. After months of previous exhibition, the film prints received by fourth or fifth run venues were often of a very poor quality.<sup>160</sup> The run-zone system, in conjunction with the studios’ practice of block-booking, enabled the major film studios and, consequently, the studio-owned exhibition chains, to dominate.<sup>161</sup>

While studio-owned exhibition chains recorded the highest attendance levels and box office revenues, it was independents that accounted for the majority of movie-theatres operating during this decade. In 1925, for example, there were approximately 15,000 movie-theatres operating in America, of which 3,300 were studio-owned, the remainder independents.<sup>162</sup> Located primarily in small towns and rural areas, independent movie-theatres (also referred to as neighbourhood houses) lacked the resources and support of their

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<sup>158</sup> Waller, ‘Imagining and Promoting the Small-Town Theater’, 176.

<sup>159</sup> Gomery, *The Coming of Sound*, 126.

<sup>160</sup> Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, 110.

<sup>161</sup> Described by Tino Balio as the ‘most controversial trade practice’, block booking was the practice by which the Hollywood studios sold their films to exhibitors. Presented as a block, exhibitors had to take a season’s films on an all-or-nothing basis, meaning that they had to agree to take sub-par films in order to also secure a film studio’s biggest new releases. Typically agreed before films were produced, exhibitors had to blind book – having not previously seen the film. It was not a practice that favoured independents, as they tended to get stuck with sub-par films. Balio, *Grand Design*, 19-20.

<sup>162</sup> Gomery, *The Coming of Sound*, 10.

more powerful counterparts. They fell into two categories: exhibitors that had one or two holdings, and those that built up sizeable regional chains. While some regional chains remained independent throughout the period, meaning that the exhibitor retained complete control of the operation and any profits, many entered into agreements with the major Hollywood studios. It was not uncommon, for example, for a regional chain to become affiliated with a specific studio. This relationship meant they retained some control over the day-to-day management of their movie-theatre but had to give a portion of their profits to the studio. Affiliation guaranteed these exhibition chains second or third run status. This special relationship secured them better access to that studio's newest film releases, thereby giving them an advantage over local competition. With the Hollywood studios' support, regional exhibition chains could often afford to replicate, in a less opulent manner, the grand aesthetic of the picture palaces and deluxe movie-theatres.

Last in the pecking order of the emerging Hollywood Studio System were the small independents. With just one or two holdings, it was these exhibitors – especially those in rural areas – that tended to be fifth-run venues. As Fuller-Seeley has remarked, they were ‘the “end of the line” in distribution’.<sup>163</sup> Lacking the financial support available to the studio-owned exhibition chains and receiving the newest releases last, independent exhibitors had to adapt in order to survive. Film was not much of a draw for independents, so they instead began to build a movie-going experience to some extent separate from the pictures on show.

Independents may have been the underdog of American film exhibition, but they had one advantage over many studio-owned exhibition chains: they had greater freedom to experiment. Publix, for example, was centrally controlled from a headquarters in New York.<sup>164</sup> Every aspect of the exhibition chain's operation was meticulously controlled by

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<sup>163</sup> Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, 111.

<sup>164</sup> Gomery, ‘Film and Business History’, 95-96.

dedicated departments, from advertising and real estate to candy (the latter from 1929). The departments made all important decisions and then passed them onto individual movie-theatres to be executed.<sup>165</sup> Independent movie-theatres, in contrast, had complete control over their operation and the ability to trial various non-filmic exhibition practices, for example, giveaways, double features, and refreshments. It was non-filmic exhibition practices, like these, that helped to draw audiences and (potentially) provide a much-needed additional source of profit. A necessary means of survival, non-filmic exhibition practices not only provided extra income but also distinguished independents further from the studio-owned exhibition chains. Not controlled by a corporate body, independents could cater to the needs of their particular audience, with cinemas establishing themselves within their community not simply as just a place to watch film but an important social hub. Much cheaper to attend – a ticket costing 10 or 20 cents rather than the upwards of 50 cents at first-run houses – neighbourhood independents had an informal atmosphere, one which fostered a more relaxed and less strictly controlled experience.<sup>166</sup>

Unlike the picture palaces and other urban deluxe movie-theatres, small-town independents were not attempting to create a highbrow movie-going experience. As Fuller-Seeley explains:

Motion picture exhibition entered the small-town scene as merely one more component of an entertainment lineup that may not have had the sensuousness or ‘high culture’ pretensions of the urban diversions but that, nevertheless, had its own vibrant and varied pleasures.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Anon., ‘Completely Functioning Departments’, *Public Opinion*, 2:58, August 17, 1929, 5.

<sup>166</sup> Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood*, 192.

<sup>167</sup> Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, 5.

Independents wanted to create a movie-going experience which appealed to the members of the community to which it belonged. This lay at the heart of the entire movie-going experience that was offered, from the film programme to the additional services available. Waller has discussed the former in his essay on independent movie-theatres in rural Kentucky during the 1930s. He argues that, despite the fact that these things were apparently not appealing to audiences in cities, exhibitors included live music acts and Westerns in order to appeal to their community's tastes.<sup>168</sup> Aside from film, small-town exhibitors also tapped into the strong pre-existing cultural entertainment heritage, in which the sale and consumption of refreshments was a well-established tradition. Lacking the desire to appear highbrow, independents were driven by different motivations, principally money, survival, and appealing to their local community. In regard to scholarly understanding of the concession stand during the 1920s, these differences are critical, but have unfortunately long been overlooked.

As the remainder of this chapter seeks to demonstrate, the picture palace's relationship (or lack thereof) with the concession stand is one perspective on most of the 1920s. It is, however, not the only one. The acceptance of vending machines by Publix prior to the 1929 Wall Street Crash, which will be discussed in chapter two, confronts the reality of the period: that refreshments were being sold and consumed *before* the Great Depression. In order to understand this studio-owned exhibition chains' actions in the late 1920s, it is first necessary to examine what had been occurring at a grassroots level in small-town movie-theatres across America in preceding years. Focusing on the experience of independents and small regional exhibition chains (largely unaffiliated to the Hollywood studios), the remainder of this chapter will deconstruct the universalised account of film exhibition. It will

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<sup>168</sup> Waller, 'Hillbilly Music and Will Rogers', 179.

consequently challenge deep-rooted beliefs about the absence of the concession stand within American movie-theatres of the 1920s.

### **Part III: A Revised History of the Concession Stand, 1914-1927**

#### **‘A Gold Mine’: The Introduction of Candy Vending<sup>169</sup>**

Pre-dating the booming popularity of the movies, a strong cultural association existed between popular entertainments and specific refreshments within American society. As discussed earlier, the country’s music halls, vaudeville theatres, and circuses were awash with popcorn, peanuts, and candy at the turn of the twentieth century. The urban middle class viewed this with disdain, but was this a view that extended beyond metropolitan areas? Did independent movie-theatres located in rural areas and small towns share the same concerns about protecting movie-going’s status as a highbrow entertainment? Or has the relationship shared by the concession stand and small-town film exhibition during this period been largely overlooked within scholarship?

A major blow to the existing scholarly narrative that dates the concession stand’s origins to the Great Depression was the action taken by Publix in the months preceding the Wall Street Crash. The studio-owned exhibition chain, which included several metropolitan picture palaces, signed a contract to install candy vending machines within its many holdings. Highly publicised due to its status as a multi-million-dollar deal, the 1929 contract undertaken by Publix was undoubtedly an important event within the history of the concession stand. Discussed in chapter two, it was this contract which first brought refreshments – specifically, candy and gum – into major studio-owned and affiliated exhibition chains on a mass scale. It is important, however, to emphasise that from analysing

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<sup>169</sup> Inter-State Vending Company, ‘The Midget Advertisement’, *Variety*, 34:6, April 10, 1914, 24-25.

archival material it is clear that this deal did not itself mark the beginning of the concession stand. The sale and consumption of refreshments had long been an integral component of film exhibition for independent exhibitors across America, as the remainder of this chapter will discuss.

For several decades, as noted throughout this thesis, it was the nation's independent movie-theatres that were the true innovators when it came to the concession stand. With less access to the newest film releases, they had a reason and a need to look to other sources of income, as well as greater freedom to experiment. As a result, it was their actions that led the way and fundamentally shaped the concession stand model – particularly in this early phase during the 1920s. Publix's 1929 deal has a larger presence within trade press publications, because given Publix's status it received greater coverage. The acceptance of candy vending by a studio-owned exhibition chain was a significant event, an area of interest for industry commentators but also other exhibition chains considering this step. Covered in the film trade press (notably *Variety* and *The Film Daily*), but also the non-film industry press, specifically *Automatic Age*, there is an abundance of archival material which can be used to understand this process.<sup>170</sup> Unfortunately, the same is not true of material relating to the practices of independent movie-theatres during this decade. Only occasionally glimpsed in trade press articles and advertisements, the history of the early concession stand within this context needs to be pieced together with great care.

Vending machines were an easy entryway into the concession stand. Defined by historian of the industry Kerry Segrave as 'self-contained automatic machines that dispense goods (such as candy and soft drinks) ... when coins are inserted', it was in the 1920s that vending machines first infiltrated all aspect of everyday life, including bus stations,

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<sup>170</sup> *Automatic Age* was a magazine, published between August 1925 and February 1945, which specialised in arcade and coin-operated machines.

workplaces, and movie-theatres.<sup>171</sup> Requiring little space or attention, they could yield significant profit. ‘The Midget’, manufactured by the Inter-State Vending Company of New York is testament to this, with advertisements dating from as early as 1914. Designed to be fixed to the back of movie-theatre seats, advertisements for the machine claimed that it turned ‘the Available Waste Space on the Back of the Chair Into a Gold Mine’.<sup>172</sup> A small device, it had a maximum capacity of 15 pieces of gum. It was gum, rather than candy, that was the most prevalent item offered in theatres during the 1920s, principally due to its long shelf life. Unlike chocolate products, it was not spoiled by heat – an important consideration at a time when vending machines were not refrigerated.<sup>173</sup> In his history of the vending machine, Segrave broke down the Midget’s profit-making potential:

Sold in lots of 10 units, the cost for each Midget was \$1.50. Inter-State claimed that 100 machines would take in \$5 per day (five cents per machine). That came to over \$1,800 a year from which was deducted the cost of the merchandise (40 cents per 100 pieces) ‘and you have a snug profit of \$1,200’, on an investment of just \$150.<sup>174</sup>

A source of considerable profit, back-of-seat vending machines were an attractive proposition for exhibitors, particularly independents. Unlike many vending machine advertisements from the 1910s, the Midget was targeted specifically at movie-theatres. This was a bold move on the behalf of the Inter-State Vending Company, demonstrating the company’s recognition of the potential that candy vending had within the movie-theatre space.

The Midget was a very early example, but other vending machines were regularly featured in *The Film Daily*’s ‘Theater Equipment and Management’ column. One issue from

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<sup>171</sup> Kerry Segrave, *Vending Machines: An American Social History* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2002), 1.

<sup>172</sup> Inter-State Vending Company, ‘The Midget Advertisement’, *Variety*, 34:6, April 10, 1914, 24-25.

<sup>173</sup> Segrave, *Vending Machines*, 19.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

December 1926, for example, included the following promotional message for a vending machine manufactured by the Mills Novelty Company of Chicago: ‘Enterprising showmen who have the space and opportunity for cashing in on “side lines,” can get a whole array of vending machines to choose from ... These machines include mint vendors ... and candy and peanut vendors.’<sup>175</sup> Targeted specifically at exhibitors, as is evident from their presence within a major film trade press magazine, these promotional materials were designed to persuade them to consider experimenting with candy vending. Such efforts only intensified as the decade progressed, and the movie-theatre was identified as a new and potentially lucrative market. One article published in *Automatic Age* in June 1927 commented: ‘The business of automatic retailing is most easily entered into by meeting an obvious public demand ... Theatres are anxious for machines which will enable them to offer their patrons the candies they desire, without the expense of a sales clerk.’<sup>176</sup> With the growing availability of goods and a pre-existing culture of eating at popular entertainments, movie-goers increasingly wanted to be able to buy and consume refreshments at the movie-theatre.

Emphasising their huge profit potential, easy operation, and stylish appearance, companies like Mills Novelty Co. worked hard to capture the film exhibition market – a goal that they had made significant strides towards achieving by the close of the decade. In regards to this thesis, these companies’ identification of the movie-theatre as a potentially lucrative market, and their subsequent efforts to break into it, demonstrate that, in spite of the attitudes of the picture palaces, refreshments – in this case, in the form of chewing gum and candy – were not a completely alien concept within the film exhibition industry.

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<sup>175</sup> Michael L. Simmons, ‘Equipment Tips’, *The Film Daily*, 38:67, December 19, 1926, 15.

<sup>176</sup> Anon., ‘This Is A Day of Scientific Merchandising – Automatic Devices Destined to Revolutionize Old Method’, *Automatic Age*, 2:11, June 1927, 62. *Automatic Age* accessed via the online archive of the publication provided by The International Arcade Museum, available from: <https://aa.arcade-museum.com/> [accessed March 10, 2021].

Aside from promotional materials and advertising from vending machine companies, a handful of reports published within trade press magazines also testify to the use of candy vending machines by independents and small independent regional chains. In April 1928, for example, *Motion Picture News* mentioned the installation of candy vending machines within a number of movie-theatres operated by Stanley, then a small exhibition chain based in Albany, New York.<sup>177</sup> Further evidence comes from a number of classified advertisements placed within *Automatic Age* which testify to independent exhibitors' interest in these machines. Placed by exhibitors themselves, these advertisements did not seek to sell but instead expressed interest in obtaining existing back-of-the-seat vending machines. Referring specifically to the machines in use in some of the country's movie-theatres, J. J. Taylor from Salt Lake City, Utah, placed one of these advertisements in 1926, as did Harry Newman from Brooklyn, New York in 1927.<sup>178</sup> Vending machines were integral to many early concession stands, but were often not the sole refreshment operation offered by independents. As the following reports demonstrate, unlike Publix and other studio-owned exhibition chains in the late 1920s, independents offered movie-goers greater choice.

The vast majority of reports within the trade press magazines are brief, often not more than a sentence. A prime example of this from 1922 was *Variety*'s fleeting remark about a movie-theatre in Kansas City, Missouri: 'For the first time in years candy is being sold in the Gayety'.<sup>179</sup> It is impossible from this short piece to understand the mechanics of this refreshment operation. It does not explain, for example, what type of candy was available, who was selling it, or even how it was being sold (by vending machine or manned counter). This is typical of most trade press references to the early concession stand, borne out of their

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<sup>177</sup> Anon., 'Albany', *Motion Picture News*, 37:16, April 21, 1928, 1284.

<sup>178</sup> Anon., 'Want Ads', *Automatic Age*, 1:11, June 1926, 80; Harry M. Newman, 'Wants Theatre Venders', *Automatic Age*, 2:7, February 1927, 36.

<sup>179</sup> Will R. Hughes, 'Kansas City', *Variety*, 68:3, September 8, 1922, 32.

relative disinterest in this aspect of film exhibition. It was not until later, when the major studio-owned exhibition chains engaged with refreshment vending (and the concession stand was proven to be a profitable side-line), that the attention of publications like *Variety* was piqued.

Fortunately, while brief, some reports do offer more insight into early concession stand practices than just a location. In December 1923, for example, *Motion Picture News* detailed several movie-theatres in Schenectady, New York, that offered refreshments, but also speculated as to why: ‘In order to increase the daily receipts, cigars and candy are now being sold from a stand in the lobby of the State theatre in Schenectady, while candy and gum are sold from the box office of the Barcli.’<sup>180</sup> There are no further details but it is likely that one of these movie-theatres, possibly the State whose concession stand appears more established, introduced refreshments first. Their success then prompting the Barcli to trial this exhibition practice.

Aside from refreshments providing a source of additional income, the experience of the Virginia Theatre in Fairmont, West Virginia, also highlighted another important motivation: appealing to movie-goers needs. The Virginia underwent significant refurbishment in 1924, motivated by the exhibitor’s desire fully to cater to his customers’ comfort needs. One component of this was the introduction of a permanent concession stand:

... the Virginia has a large lobby and one side of it is occupied by a candy store, soda fountain and popcorn stand. Showmen have differed regarding this

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<sup>180</sup> Several vending machines entered the market in 1925 which were designed specifically to vend packs of cigarettes. Popular within many locations, for example, department stores, this type of vending machine was less common within America’s movie-theatres. Many of the studio-owned exhibition chains did not sell cigarettes or permit smoking within the building. Publix, for example, had briefly considered allowing smoking on the mezzanine lounges of its movie-theatres but decided against it in December 1929, following the Pathé studio fire. The exhibition chain feared that smoking posed too great a fire hazard to its movie-theatres. Anon., ‘Albany’, *Motion Picture News*, 28:26, December 29, 1923, 3062; Anon., ‘Smoking Banned in Mezzanines’, *Publix Opinion*, 3:15, December 20, 1929, 8; Segrave, *Vending Machines*, 23-24.

feature. But 21 of these letters refer to the ‘lobby store’ in a highly complimentary way. One girl writes: ‘You don’t have to go to the other end of town to get candy or soda.’<sup>181</sup>

The issue of refreshments was a contentious area for many within the film industry but, as this report published in *Moving Picture World* demonstrates, it was a risk that paid off for many exhibitors. Visitors to the Virginia embraced the concession stand wholeheartedly.

Internalising the refreshments service meant that they were much more accessible, and movie-goers no longer had to leave the cinema to obtain them. That there was such a large volume of positive responses from the local community was testament to the demand. This sentiment was echoed in a feature piece published in *Motion Picture News* focusing on the construction of the Branford Theatre in Newark, New Jersey, in March 1921. Elaborately and lavishly decorated, it is clear from the report that the Branford was emulating the grand picture palaces of New York City – just on a smaller scale (it seated 1,200). The article details its design and key features, which included a concession stand. Deviating from the picture palaces’ strict prohibition of refreshments, the Branford dedicated a portion of its main lobby to ‘candy, cigars, and other concessions for the convenience of patrons.’<sup>182</sup> While the motivation behind this is not as detailed as that given by the Virginia theatre, it is clear that the exhibitor recognised the need to cater to customer comforts, which here extended to offering refreshments. Direct references to the sale of candy and gum, like those discussed here, are few and far between. Closer analysis of the archives, however, reveals further evidence.

Accounts of movie-theatre robberies provide an additional source of information for understanding the concession stand. Several articles spanning the decade of the twenties

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<sup>181</sup> Anon., ‘Discovers Patronage Attractors’, *Moving Picture World*, 69:9, August 30, 1924, 694.

<sup>182</sup> Anon., ‘The Worst Seat at the Branford Is a Good Seat’, *Motion Picture News*, 23:11, March 5, 1921, 1835.

demonstrate how movie-theatres were a prime target for crime. It is reasonable to suggest that this was only heightened by the presence of the concession stand (whether a small manned counter or vending machine). Located in the lobby, the concession stand was a visible and (often) easy target, more accessible than box-office takings, which were typically stored overnight in safes or locked offices. This seems to have been the case in a series of burglaries undertaken in Indianapolis Falls, Indiana, during September 1921. Burglars targeted two theatres, one 'legitimate' (or stage) and the other a movie-theatre, early one Sunday morning. While they failed to break into either venues' safes, the intruders took the daily receipts from the movie-theatre's candy stand, a bounty of \$225.<sup>183</sup>

It was not just criminals that targeted movie-theatre concession stands, however. Vending machines were easy targets for opportunists and mischievous youngsters. One particular incident of this type was recorded in a 1920 issue of *Moving Picture World*:

A letter enclosing 45 cents in silver coins was received through the mail by Manager George E. Carpenter, of the Paramount-Empress Theatre, Salt Lake City, from an unknown person who explained that the money was to cover the cost of candy removed from boxes in the theatre through the use of slugs. The letter appeared to be in the hand-writing of a youth ... The letter accompanying the money read: 'My friend and I put slots in your candy boxes today ... We did not think we were stealing at the time.'<sup>184</sup>

This report highlights a key disadvantage of vending machines, specifically back-of-the-seat models: that they were easy to steal from. The young boys in this case confessed to using 'slugs' to stealthily obtain candy.<sup>185</sup> While there are several reports from the period of slugs (and mice) being found living within movie-theatre vending machines, that is not what is

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<sup>183</sup> Anon., 'Unsuccessful Burglary', *Variety*, 64:4, September 16, 1921, 13.

<sup>184</sup> Anon., 'Here's Where Films Hold Good Influence Over Boy Who "Slugged" Candy Box', *Moving Picture World*, 44:8, May 22, 1920, 1099.

<sup>185</sup> Anon., *Variety*, 61:12, February 11, 1921, 11.

being alluded to here.<sup>186</sup> Machines, like the Midget, were vulnerable to another type of slug – a practice in which buttons, plastic tokens, or metal washers would be inserted in place of money.<sup>187</sup>

Isolated events, like those at the Paramount-Empress Theatre, might appear harmless, but it was a problem that lost exhibitors across America significant amounts of money. A problem by no means confined only to independents, slugs would also plague Publix (and the other studio-owned exhibition chains) in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Commenting on the only disadvantage of vending machines in 1931, Max Schosberg, then the head of Publix's candy department, remarked: 'Our losses are very large and they eat up a great deal of our profits. Therefore, all manufacturers should make every effort to combat the slug evil.'<sup>188</sup> Slugs proved such a severe problem that a Congressional bill was introduced in May 1929 in an attempt to combat this nuisance. Proposed by Louis Ludlow, a Representative from Indiana, it was hoped that this would better protect exhibitors: '[the bill] would protect film houses equipped with candy vending machines on the backs of seats against the use of slugs. The bill would amend the law so as to prohibit the manufacture or use of tokens and devices in similitude of coins.'<sup>189</sup> The need for such a bill is significant, indicative not only of how widespread slugs were but, also, how damaging this practice was. It is important to highlight that while Publix had begun to install vending machines by the time this bill was proposed, it was still early on in the process of installation. The bill also refers specifically to back-of-the-seat machines, models which were favoured by independents and largely absent from studio-owned exhibition chains. The timing and specificity of the bill indicate that it was motivated

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<sup>186</sup> Anon., '5c Bargain', *Variety*, 98:13, April 9, 1930, 12.

<sup>187</sup> Max Schosberg, 'The Theatre and the Vending Business', *Automatic Age*, 7:7, February 1931, 17, 19; Segrave, *Vending Machines*, 12.

<sup>188</sup> Anon., 'Some Inspiring Notes Caught at the Convention', *Automatic Age*, 7:8, March 1931, 25.

<sup>189</sup> Anon., 'Bill Protects Theatre From Losses In Candy Machines', *Motion Picture News*, 39:19, May 11, 1929, 1572.

by much more than the needs of the studio-owned exhibition chain, suggesting that this was a problem which had long plagued small exhibitors.

Movie-theatres were often the targets of crime, but could also be the perpetrators of it too. A prime example of this was the prosecution of a concessionaire (a more respectable term for candy butcher) who operated at the Garrick Theatre in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1927.<sup>190</sup> Robert Alvord, the guilty party, was found to have been incorrectly weighing and labelling candy boxes at the movie-theatre – charging patrons high prices for small amounts of candy. This case is interesting because it shows that, while many independents tended to operate their own refreshment operations (in order to retain all profits), some movie-theatres, like the Garrick, were operating on a candy privilege basis. Having evolved somewhat over previous decades, it was no longer individual candy butchers that obtained privilege rights, but rather official concession companies which would provide and maintain all equipment and supplies as required.

While concessionaire companies would grow in size and scope as the twentieth century progressed, during the 1920s many were typically small, regional operations. Alvord, for example, was the local manager for the Jacobs Brothers Concession Company based in Buffalo, New York.<sup>191</sup> Advertisements listed in trade press magazines testify to the existence of other concessionaire companies operating at this time. Both the Universal Theatre Concession Company and National Candy Company were based in Chicago, the former operating there from as early as 1922. Early concessionaires offered two types of services. The first saw them acting as a supplier, providing – either on a lease or sale-based contract – concession-related equipment (namely vending machines) which the exhibitor was then fully responsible for maintaining and operating. The second available option was very similar apart

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<sup>190</sup> Anon., 'Candy Gyp Fined \$20', *Variety*, 89:10, December 21, 1927, 57.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

from the fact that rather than the exhibitor maintaining the vending machines, the concessionaire operated them in their stead, taking the responsibility away from movie-theatre staff. This latter was an updated version of candy privilege – concessionaires were responsible for the daily upkeep and maintenance of vending machines, in return for a cut of any profits. In January 1928, the National Candy Company reported that candy privilege in some of Chicago’s movie-theatres (and legitimate theatres) could reach over \$1,000 per week.<sup>192</sup> While the concessionaire industry was still in its infancy, these profit margins demonstrate just how lucrative movie-theatre refreshments were becoming by the late 1920s. Despite operational practices increasing in sophistication, events like those recorded at the Garrick Theatre did little to better the public’s image of candy concessionaires, the new iteration of the candy butcher. It took several years to outgrow this image, by which time concessionaire companies operated on a national level, providing not only concession stand supplies but also movie-theatre equipment more generally (for example, seating, projection equipment, and cleaning supplies).

The previous examples have all, in some way, reported on the presence or operation of concession stands (in varied forms) throughout the 1920s. Advertisements for vending machines and brief reports on movie-theatres are invaluable, all helping to build a strong case for the widespread availability of refreshments throughout the decade. It is not only direct references to the operation of concession stands which provide insight, however, as trade press magazines also contain more ambiguous references. An advertisement placed in *Moving Picture World* by the Du Pont Fabrikoid company in 1921 provides an early example of this. Manufacturing a hardy seat covering, the company guaranteed that Fabrikoid would hold up to the daily wear and tear that movie-theatre seats were subjected to. Refreshments were listed in the advertisement as one such threat: ‘smear’d with candy – how does your

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<sup>192</sup> Anon., ‘Midnite Columbia Revue Framing on Candy Money’, *Variety*, 90:1, January 18, 1928, 39.

upholstery stand up under this treatment?’<sup>193</sup> The company’s decision to include this point in their ad testifies to the consumption of candy by movie-goers. Melted and smeared into seats, it was evidently creating upkeep problems for some exhibitors.

This advertisement lends validity, of course, to picture palaces’ concerns about allowing refreshments, as did attempts by some exhibitors to prohibit chewing gum. Edward Albee, one of the owners of the Keith-Albee vaudeville theatre circuit, took a strong stand against chewing gum within his theatres in 1925:

The move on the part of Mr. Albee to stamp out the gum habit in the theaters is expected to spread to other parts of the country. In the K.-A. houses it has been found that the average complaint is one a week. It also often happens that the theater has to make good damages that are caused by the careless parking of gum on seats or other places where it might do harm.<sup>194</sup>

While relating to vaudeville venues, this example is included because motion pictures had been incorporated into the daily programme offered by Keith-Albee theatres by 1925. Film was also the medium through which Albee attempted to discourage chewing gum. His theatres utilised a short trailer at the beginning of the entertainment programme, criticising its use.<sup>195</sup>

Previously cited as supporting evidence for picture palaces concerns about mess, *Variety*’s column Tommy Tattles provides additional evidence for the sale and consumption of refreshments within the movie-theatre. Several of these columns referred to the presence of refreshments, for example: ‘stains caused by ice cream cones’.<sup>196</sup> Gray’s main gripe, however, concerned the noise disturbance that these refreshments posed to audiences. In an

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<sup>193</sup> Du Pont Fabrikoid, ‘Fabrikoid Advertisement’, *Moving Picture World*, April 23, 1921, 891.

<sup>194</sup> Anon., ‘Theatres Trying to Stamp Out Gum Habit’, *Automatic Age*, 1:3, October 1925, 31.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Thomas J. Gray, ‘Tommy’s Tattles’, *Variety*, 67:4, June 16, 1922, 11.

August 1922 issue, Gray suggested that: ‘All candy sold in theatres must be wrapped only in paper that will not “crinkle”’.<sup>197</sup> This builds upon a comment made in an earlier issue, in which he called for exhibitors to invent ‘noiseless peanuts’.<sup>198</sup> While satirical, these observations are valuable because they are grounded in real experiences of movie-going in 1922. Tommy Tattles corroborates that refreshments (namely candy and chewing gum) were being consumed within movie-theatres, and lends credence to the picture palaces’ concerns about damage to expensive interiors. It is clear, however, that regardless of mess many exhibitors continued to allow their sale and consumption – even if that was begrudgingly, as was the case for Albee.

#### **‘The Nickels and Dimes Soon Grow into Dollars’: Popcorn Enters the Movie-theatre<sup>199</sup>**

From a modern perspective, perhaps the most surprising absence was popcorn – a food which is today pretty much synonymous with movie-going. Scholarship focusing specifically on popcorn is limited, but scholars, led by Andrew F. Smith, maintain that popcorn was absent from movie-theatres during the 1920s. This is in part due to the reasons previously discussed, relating to the working-class associations that popcorn carried in the early twentieth century. In his history of popcorn, however, Smith offered an additional explanation for its absence: that movie-theatres were, by design, incompatible with early popcorn machines.<sup>200</sup>

During the 1920s, many movie-theatres were not constructed with outside vents, resulting in poor ventilation. Smith argues that this was not a suitable venue to operate early popcorn machines – machines that had a tendency to emit smoke and unpleasant fumes as a

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<sup>197</sup> Thomas J. Gray, ‘Tommy’s Tattles’, *Variety*, 67:11, August 4, 1922, 10.

<sup>198</sup> Thomas J. Gray, ‘Tommy’s Tattles’, *Variety*, 67:4, June 16, 1922, 11.

<sup>199</sup> Kingery Mfg. Co., ‘Kingery Advertisement’, *Exhibitors Trade Review*, 14:5, June 30, 1923, 71.

<sup>200</sup> Smith, *Popped Culture*, 100.

by-product of the popping process.<sup>201</sup> It is for these reasons he suggests, that popcorn proved ‘to be a liability rather than an asset’ during this period.<sup>202</sup> The traditional scholarly narrative maintains that popcorn was first introduced to American movie-theatres during the 1930s, its high profit margin making it an attractive source of additional income for exhibitors during the Great Depression.<sup>203</sup> While it is true that popcorn would not become a widespread component of the concession stand until the mid-1930s at the earliest, archival evidence suggests that some independent exhibitors – especially in the Midwest – were beginning to offer this refreshment during the 1920s.

The problems described by Smith were an important consideration for exhibitors, but perhaps, not as significant as an issue as he suggests. In his history of the leading popcorn machine company Cretors, Richard Hagle reiterates how problematic steam-powered machines were: ‘A burner might clog, a valve might stick, and the boilers could explode. The result could be serious injury or even death.’<sup>204</sup> Hagle provides validity for Smith’s argument, but does not paint the full picture. This is because while steam powered machines had dominated at the turn of the twentieth century, by the 1920s manufacturers were beginning to favour a new power source: electricity. Quieter, cleaner, and (most importantly) safer, this shift was precipitated by Cretors’ recognition that a new indoor market was developing.

Cretors had made their name at the turn of the twentieth century manufacturing popcorn street wagons, but by the mid-1910s the company’s focus had begun to shift. Named the ‘Earn-More’ Machine upon its release in 1917, Cretors reinvented the popcorn machine. Dramatically different from the large street wagons, its design was tailored to suit indoor businesses. Compact, electric, and attractively designed, the ‘Earn-More’ also boasted a large

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>203</sup> Cynthia Clampitt, *Midwest Maize: How Corn Shaped the U.S. Heartland* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 118.

<sup>204</sup> Hagle, *C. Cretors & Co.*, 66.

capacity – reportedly able to produce 80 bags of popcorn in just 30 minutes.<sup>205</sup> While the company would release other indoor models, for example the ‘Graduate’ Counter Popcorn Model which was a smaller, counter-top model, the ‘Earn-More’ remained its best-seller throughout the 1920s.<sup>206</sup>

Popcorn machine sales catalogues, produced by Cretors to advertise the ‘Earn-More’ machine to potential buyers, allude to the company’s new target market. In 1917, a Cretors sales catalogue suggested that stores could prove a prime location for its popcorn machines.<sup>207</sup> By the following year, Cretors’ list of potential venues had expanded significantly: chemists, department stores, delicatessens, and theatres, to name just a few, were now included.<sup>208</sup> It is the latter that is of interest here. Apparently referring to the movie-theatre (as opposed to a traditional theatre), Cretors issued a direct and targeted appeal to exhibitors in its 1918 sales catalogue:

Theatre Owners, you now have a chance to make two profits from each admission. Place this machine either in the lobby or inside your theatre. During intermissions throw on screen one of the slides shown on page 11 of this booklet – have a boy or girl walk down the aisle with a basket of sacked corn. Then watch the nickels and dimes roll in.<sup>209</sup>

Cretors’ encouragement of using the screen actively to promote popcorn sales is noteworthy. Not only presenting it as an effective method of boosting sales, the company’s provision of slides (which upon request could be personalised with a movie-theatre’s name) was

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<sup>205</sup> C. Cretors & Co., ‘Everybody Buys It’, *Cretors Sales Catalog* (Chicago: Illinois, 1918), 6. All Cretors Sales Catalogues accessed via the online archive provided by Cretors, available from: <https://www.cretors.com/page.asp?i=66> [accessed February 24, 2021].

<sup>206</sup> C. Cretors & Co., ‘C. Cretors & Co.’, *Cretors Sales Catalog 2* (Chicago: Illinois, 1925), 6.

<sup>207</sup> C. Cretors & Co., ‘Electric Power Models’, *Cretors Sales Catalog* (Chicago: Illinois, 1917), 2.

<sup>208</sup> C. Cretors & Co., ‘Everybody Buys It’, *Cretors Sales Catalog* (Chicago: Illinois, 1918), 1.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

innovative.<sup>210</sup> The final two chapters of this thesis will discuss in greater detail the use of promotional intermission trailers, a practice that became widespread following the release of *Gone with the Wind* in 1939. Though not as sophisticated as an advertising strategy as during these later decades, Cretors' encouragement of promotional slides from as early as 1917 was pioneering for its time. The company was not only considering the imaginative ways in which popcorn could be advertised but, importantly, it was tailoring its services to the film exhibition industry. The screen was, after all, the movie-theatres' most effective promotional tool.

Cretors wanted to break into the film exhibition market and, based on the persuasive arguments presented in their sales catalogues, it is clear why exhibitors would have been enticed by popcorn. One key selling point that was presented was that popcorn appealed to the senses and, therefore, virtually sold itself. Seasoned with hot butter and salt, it had an enticing aroma which, Cretors promised, would promote sales.<sup>211</sup> Appealing to the senses (smell in this case but also sight) would become an easy yet important promotional tool for several concession items as the decades progressed. First outlined in their 1917 sales catalogue, though repeated verbatim in the sales catalogues published throughout the 1920s, it was Cretors' bold claims about popcorn's profitability, however, that proved its strongest sales asset. Sold at 5 cents a bag, Cretors asserted that this would result, on average, in 3½ cents profit for the exhibitor – a figure that remained steady in subsequent decades.<sup>212</sup> The sales catalogue broke down the popcorn machines' profitability even further, stating that if an exhibitor sold 80 bags of popcorn a day (which they believed a reasonable and achievable target), then an exhibitor could expect to take, on average, \$1,000 profit from popcorn a

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>211</sup> C. Cretors & Co., 'Electric Power Models', *Cretors Sales Catalog* (Chicago: Illinois, 1917), 3-4.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 3.

year.<sup>213</sup> Persuasive as a sales pitch, the attractive profit margins suggested by Cretors' were a powerful means of convincing exhibitors that popcorn was a credible investment. It provided an easy way to make money, with very little effort on their part.

Cretors' decision to move to manufacturing indoor models did not go unnoticed by its growing competition. Kingery, based out of Cincinnati, Ohio, and Holcomb and Hoke from Indianapolis, Indiana, both began to manufacture popcorn machines for indoor use. In 1923, Kingery had two products on the market: the Kingery No. 990 and the Kingery No. 993.<sup>214</sup> The Kingery No. 990 was larger, freestanding, and gas-powered. A more advanced model, it had the means to automatically pop and season popcorn, but also to roast peanuts. In contrast, the Kingery No. 993 was a smaller counter top model. Electrically powered, it had the same popcorn-making capabilities as the Kingery No. 990, but had a peanut warmer in place of a roaster. Requiring very little space, both models could be safely operated inside a business, be that a grocer, chemist, or movie-theatre.

The popcorn industry's new indoor market influenced not only the type of machines being manufactured, but also their advertising. Similar to the language used to market candy vending machines, common phrases in Kingery's advertising included: 'The nickels and dimes soon grow into dollars' and 'No additional space is required – costs practically nothing for upkeep ... their attractiveness brings additional patrons to you'.<sup>215</sup> The company highlighted its popcorn machines' four key selling points: they were attractive, inconspicuous, low maintenance and, most significantly, profitable. Requiring very little space (like candy vending machines), they had significant profit-making potential: reportedly, 70 percent profit on every dollar.<sup>216</sup> Advertisements for Kingery's products appeared

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Kingery Mfg. Co., 'Kingery Advertisement', *Exhibitors Trade Review*, 14:5, June 30, 1923, 71.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

exclusively in *Exhibitors Trade Review* during 1923. Its advertising campaign was not as prolific as that of Holcomb and Hoke who ran regular campaigns throughout the decade for its popcorn and peanut machine: the Butter-Kist.

Holcomb and Hoke first began manufacturing popcorn machines in 1914 and, unlike its main competitors, the company only produced machines for indoor use.<sup>217</sup> Advertisements for the Butter-Kist appeared in *Exhibitors Trade Review* and *Motion Picture News* intermittently throughout the decade, with campaigns running in 1922, 1923, 1925, and 1926. Much like Cretors and Kingery, its advertisements emphasised the machine's key qualities, namely its attractive appearance and impressive profitability.<sup>218</sup> Advertising for all three companies was very similar: all used images (both illustrations and photographs of their respective popcorn machines) and persuasive sales claims. Their most effective promotional tool, however, were testimonials from satisfied movie-theatre managers and owners.

Each Butter-Kist advertisement contained a minimum of four positive reviews, provided by satisfied movie-theatre managers or owners. Many testimonials praised how easy the machine was to operate, with one exhibitor claiming that was so simple even his six-year-old daughter could use it.<sup>219</sup> The main point of discussion within these testimonials, however, referenced just how profitable exhibitors found these machines to be. Several made reference to being initially sceptical of the Butter-Kist's advertised profitability. Mr West manager at the Apollo Theatre in Oberlin, Ohio, for example, described how he had initially believed these claims to have been a 'fairy tale' – an opinion which quickly changed months after he began operating a Butter-Kist machine within his movie-theatre lobby.<sup>220</sup> Regardless of any

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<sup>217</sup> Smith, *Popped Culture*, 93.

<sup>218</sup> Holcomb and Hoke Manufacturing Co., 'Butter-Kist Advertisement', *Exhibitors Trade Review*, 12:6, July 8, 1922, 445; Holcomb and Hoke Manufacturing Co., 'Butter-Kist Advertisement', *Exhibitors Trade Review*, 14:5, June 30, 1923, 81.

<sup>219</sup> Holcomb and Hoke Manufacturing Co., 'Butter-Kist Advertisement', *Exhibitors Trade Review*, 13:5, December 30, 1922, 47.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

initial doubts, it is clear from these testimonials that exhibitors found the Butter-Kist popcorn machine to be very profitable. An exhibitor in Greenville, Kentucky, reported earning \$60 net profit each week in 1923, while another in Rockland, Maine, over the course of 1925 made \$2,500 from popcorn sales.<sup>221</sup> These are just two examples, but the majority of the Butter-Kist testimonials referred in some way to the specific profits being made – a strategy which was also reflected in the testimonials used by Cretors and Kingery.<sup>222</sup> Popcorn proved such a success in some towns that it was often more profitable than the box office, as was reportedly the case for the New Lewis Theatre in Independence, Missouri.<sup>223</sup>

A large number of the testimonials ended with the exhibitors concerned encouraging others to invest in a Butter-Kist machine. Mr Barrett, manager of the Strand Theatre in Parkersburg, West Virginia, commented in 1923 that: ‘Any man who has a picture theatre is making a great mistake by not having one of these Butter-Kist machines.’<sup>224</sup> These testimonials gave credibility to the company’s sales pitches by giving prospective buyers real success stories of fellow exhibitors. Viewed in isolation, the sales talk used in the company’s advertising seemed over-hyped and unrealistic, but these positive testimonials boosted confidence in the Butter-Kist machine, making investment an attractive and reliable prospect.

Popcorn machine testimonials are significant because they testify to the growing popularity and success of popcorn machines within American movie-theatres during the 1920s. Overlooked in scholarship, it is archival evidence of this kind which can help to revise flawed accounts of the concession stand during this period. Smith, for example, has argued

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<sup>221</sup> Holcomb and Hoke Manufacturing Co., ‘Butter-Kist Advertisement’, *Exhibitors Trade Review*, 14:5, June 30, 1923, 81; Holcomb and Hoke Manufacturing Co., ‘Butter-Kist Advertisement’, *Exhibitors Trade Review*, 19:5, December 26, 1925, 107.

<sup>222</sup> C. Cretors & Co., ‘A Cretors’ Booster’, *Cretors Sales Catalog* (Chicago: Illinois, 1921), 8-9; Kingery Mfg. Co., ‘Kingery Advertisement’, *Exhibitors Trade Review*, 14:5, June 30, 1923, 71.

<sup>223</sup> Holcomb and Hoke Manufacturing Co., ‘Butter-Kist Advertisement’, *Exhibitors Trade Review*, 19:5, December 26, 1925, 107.

<sup>224</sup> Holcomb and Hoke Manufacturing Co., ‘Butter-Kist Advertisement’, *Exhibitors Trade Review*, 14:5, June 30, 1923, 81.

that there is very little evidence to support Holcomb and Hoke's claims that Butter-Kist machines were operating in American movie-theatres during the 1920s.<sup>225</sup> The sheer number of testimonials used in the company's advertising would seem to disprove this. Useful for prospective popcorn machine operators in the 1920s, these testimonials are also invaluable for scholars. Providing evidence for just how profitable these machines were, they also offer insight into the motivations driving exhibition practices during this period, namely, that some exhibitors required an additional source of income. Testimonials also allude to a growing demand from some audiences for refreshments within the movie-theatre. A valuable source for understanding the early history of the concession stand, popcorn machine testimonials also provide unique insight into small-town film exhibition during this period.

Cretors, in the introduction to a 1925 sales catalogue, proclaimed there was 'No City Too Large – No Town Too Small' for a popcorn machine.<sup>226</sup> Whilst true in theory, in practice another trend was emerging. With very few exceptions, the popcorn machine testimonials during the 1920s from all the major popcorn machine manufacturers came from exhibitors, located in small towns. The vast majority were situated in largely rural states such as North Dakota, Kansas, and Oklahoma.<sup>227</sup> One exhibitor suggested that a popcorn machine was a necessary addition for any movie-theatre located in a town with a population of 2,000 – which as has been previously established, denoted relatively small-town status during the 1920s.<sup>228</sup> As the testimonials demonstrate, popcorn machines (like candy vending machines) were an easy and relatively unobtrusive additional source of revenue – and one that was becoming increasingly popular with small-town audiences, especially those in the Midwest.

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<sup>225</sup> Smith, *Popped Culture*, 93; Anon., 'Butter-Kist Popcorn and Peanut Machines Earn You Big Profits', *Exhibitors Trade Review*, 19:5, December 26, 1925, 110.

<sup>226</sup> C. Cretors & Co., 'C. Cretors & Co.', *Cretors Sales Catalog 2* (Chicago: Illinois, 1925), 1.

<sup>227</sup> Holcomb and Hoke Manufacturing Co., 'Butter-Kist Advertisement', *Exhibitors Trade Review*, 13:5, December 30, 1922, 47; Holcomb and Hoke Manufacturing Co., 'Butter-Kist Advertisement', *Exhibitors Trade Review*, 19:5, December 26, 1925, 107.

<sup>228</sup> C. Cretors & Co., 'Popping Facts', *Cretors Sales Catalog 3* (Chicago: Illinois, 1925), 2.

This particular region, which produced the vast proportion of America's popcorn (in this case referring to the crop, a specific type of maize, rather than the manufactured snack) consequently developed a strong economic and cultural association with popcorn. Given this pre-existing affinity, it seems only natural that audiences in this area would be susceptible to consuming popcorn while at the movie-theatre.

While not explicitly specified, it is also reasonable to assume that the movie-theatres featured in the testimonials were largely independents. This can in part be surmised from their small-town, and largely rural, locations. It can also be inferred from the amount of popcorn machines that exhibitors state they have – typically few in number. In Cretors 1925 sales catalogue, for example, James Kerman described owning five popcorn machines – one for each of his five movie-theatres.<sup>229</sup> Making purchases of one, two, or in Kerman's case five, popcorn machines, it is fair to assume that it was independents providing these testimonials. The major exhibition chains would, in subsequent years, operate in a different manner. Publix's candy vending, for example, was centrally controlled by a designated candy department located in New York. It was this department which was responsible for securing a multi-million-dollar deal with a concessionaire company for hundreds of vending machines, enough to have multiple machines in each of their holdings.

Sales catalogues, advertisements, and testimonials provide sufficient evidence to challenge Smith's assertion that popcorn was absent from American movie-theatres during the 1920s. Available in some independent movie-theatres, it is evident from profit reports that in many small towns popcorn was already beginning to establish its popularity as a movie-time food. While, as chapter three discusses, it would not be until World War II that popcorn would cement its position as the king of the concession stand, it is important to acknowledge

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

that in certain regions of America popcorn was making inroads into the nation's independent movie-theatres from the early 1920s.

## **Conclusion**

The archival evidence presented within this chapter suggests that the established scholarly narrative of the early concession stand requires significant revision. Throughout the 1920s, many of America's small independents and regional chains had internalised the sale and consumption of refreshments – including chewing gum, candy, and in some areas, popcorn. While it was the later actions of Publix which garnered significantly more press coverage, earlier developments occurring at a grass roots level were equally, if not more, significant. As was the case for many later developments, in regards to the concession stand, it was independent exhibitors who were the trailblazers. Lacking the support of the Hollywood film studios, independents had the need, but also the freedom, to be creative in their approach to film exhibition. Economically, the incorporation of this non-filmic exhibition practice within the independent exhibition model provided a much-needed additional source of income – one which would become increasingly important when the Great Depression gripped the country during the early 1930s.

Chipping away at the traditional scholarly narrative of the early history of the concession stand, this chapter has highlighted the pitfalls of viewing American film exhibition as one neat universal model. The experience of the picture palaces and first-run houses located in America's largest cities offers one perspective on the 1920s. It is not enough, however, to explain film exhibition everywhere. As Part II of this chapter demonstrated (supported by the archival evidence presented in Part III), other movie-going experiences also need to be considered, even if they are harder to locate. Urban versus rural

and independent versus studio-owned exhibition chain have been the focus of this chapter, and are important distinctions which form the framework for the remainder of this thesis.

This chapter works in tandem with the following one, both seeking to revise specific threads of the current scholarly narrative. Having argued here that refreshments were already available in American independent movie-theatres throughout the 1920s, chapter two begins with discussion of the major studio-owned exhibition chains' early dalliance with confectionary – a development which occurred in the months *preceding* the Wall Street Crash, and therefore, the Great Depression. As engaging with a key piece of archival evidence, the in-house journal *Publix Opinion*, demonstrates their experiments with candy vending machines further undermines the established scholarly narrative that there was no food within the American movie-theatre during the 1920s. Moreover, since Publix had a monopoly over some of the nation's largest and grandest first-run deluxe movie-theatres, it also raises questions over whether, by the closing years of the decade, the picture palaces were as opposed to refreshments as scholars have previously thought.

## Chapter Two: The Age of the Candy Counter, 1928-1939

Within film scholarship, the Great Depression has become mythologised as the birthplace for the concession stand. The dire economic need of the 1930s, a bleak contrast to the prosperity (albeit unequally shared) of the preceding decade, has been regarded by many scholars as the principal catalyst for the entry of refreshments – namely candy, gum, and popcorn – into American movie-theatres. While the economic climate of the decade forced exhibitors – both independents and studio-owned exhibition chains – to seek additional means of staying in business, as is demonstrated by the tidal wave of giveaways (of both goods and cash) which characterised film exhibition during the period, this chapter will argue that the concession stand was not born out of this same desperation. Indeed, as argued in chapter one, several major studio-owned exhibition chains had already pioneered the sale of candy and chewing gum before October 1929.

This chapter, offering a revised view of the concession stand during the Great Depression, is divided into three parts. The first discusses the acceptance of candy vending machines by the major studio-owned exhibition circuits, notably Publix, in the late 1920s. Further contradicting the traditional scholarly narrative discussed in the previous chapter, this section demonstrates that this was a process which had begun several months *before* the Wall Street Crash of October 1929. The second part outlines the variety of non-filmic exhibition practices which were introduced by exhibitors – particularly independents – during the early 1930s, all designed to increase movie-theatre attendance in a desperate attempt to survive the worst years of the Great Depression. The concession stand, according to the traditional scholarly narrative, was among the emergency measures introduced during the early 1930s. This chapter contends, however, that this was not the case. If anything, of the entire period covered by this thesis, it was during the early 1930s that the concession stand underwent the least development. Instead, as argued in the final part of the chapter, it was in the years after

1935 that further significant developments relating to the concession stand occurred. While the Great Depression lingered on until the American involvement in World War II in December 1941, exhibition had slowly begun to recover in the years between 1935 and 1939. Increasing movie-theatre attendance levels attest to this, as does the period of extensive modernisation and remodelling which characterised American film exhibition at this time. It is these developments that will be the focus of the final section of this chapter, a key component being the transition from vending machines to manned candy counters. Analysing the mechanics of this development, within the context of depression era exhibition practices, the chapter will conclude by considering what motivated this evolution in the concession stand. Was it a product of the crippling effects of the Great Depression or of natural progression, tied to the period of stabilisation and modernisation which characterised American movie-theatres post-1935?

### **Part I: Vending Machines Enter the Majors, 1928-1932**

#### **‘Such Assumptions were Swept Aside’: Great Depression Origins?’<sup>230</sup>**

This chapter further critiques the idea that it was only as a direct consequence of the Great Depression that exhibitors embraced refreshments. The current section works in tandem with the one that follows to deconstruct this argument, presenting archival evidence that demonstrates that exhibitors at all levels had embraced some form of refreshment operation prior to the Wall Street Crash, thereby predating the onset of the Great Depression. Before discussing this, however, it is necessary first to analyse the existing scholarship on the concession stand’s Great Depression origins, summarising the argument and where it originated.

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<sup>230</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 79.

The origin of this narrative is traceable back to the work of Douglas Gomery. As has already been noted, he was the first scholar to give significant attention to the history of the concession stand in his book *Shared Pleasures*.<sup>231</sup> In what was a comprehensive history of American film exhibition, Gomery devoted a small section to discussing non-filmic exhibition practices and their overlooked importance within scholarly discourse. It was here that he provided a brief overview of the concession stand during cinema's early history:

The Great Depression also pushed movie exhibitors to seek a new source of revenue ... Rather than let patrons buy snacks from confectionary stores within a few steps of the cashier's booth, exhibitors ignored the associations with 'lower-class' amusements and began to sell candy, then soft drinks, and finally popcorn in their lobbies. This transformation represented a radical break from the development of movie exhibition in the previous thirty years. The selling of food had long been associated with carnivals, burlesque shows, and cheaper-class entertainment ... During the Great Depression such assumptions were swept aside.<sup>232</sup>

It is from this passage that the idea of the Depression-era origins of the movie-theatre concession stand was born.

Subsequent scholars have simply echoed Gomery's summary. A prime example of this is found in the introduction to *Exhibition: The Film Reader* (2001), in which Ina Rae Hark observed that:

In the nickelodeon days spectators regularly brought confectionaries in with them, but at least some theaters had a concessionaire hawk his wares ... The [picture] palaces, stressing the signifiers of grand opera, legitimate theater,

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 79-82.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 79.

and the luxury dwelling, banished such tawdry vulgarities, but the Depression brought them back.<sup>233</sup>

While much condensed, Hark simply reiterated Gomery's interpretation, and she is not alone. This simplistic summary is reiterated in many discussions of film exhibition during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>234</sup> James Lyons, in his own discussion of the origins of the concession stand, not only follows Gomery's interpretation of the period verbatim but also refers specifically to *Shared Pleasures*.<sup>235</sup> Commenting on audiences and film exhibition in the wake of the Great Depression, Richard Butsch provides yet another example: 'They [studio owned and operated exhibition chains] ended the ban on food and drinks in the theater and opened refreshment stands to supplement income.'<sup>236</sup> Whilst brief, this quote presents the same inaccuracies, once again reiterating Gomery's interpretation. Butsch also demonstrates the natural bias within scholarship to favour the experience of the larger studio-owned exhibition chains. He suggests that it was the studio-owned exhibition chains who led the way in innovating the early concession stand, an assumption disproved by the archival evidence presented in chapter one.

Since Gomery was the first to present a comprehensive narrative of the concession stand, it is unfortunate that subsequent scholars have taken his account at face value. Rather than building upon and challenging his narrative, subsequent writers have condensed and repeated a simplified version of what he presented in *Shared Pleasures*. In nearly all cases, as is the case of both Butsch and Lyons, for example, Gomery is the only reference offered in relation to the concession stand. The problem lies not in citing Gomery's work (he is

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<sup>233</sup> Hark, 'General Introduction', 14-15.

<sup>234</sup> For further examples of this narrative, see: Clampitt, *Midwest Maize*, 118; Thomas Doherty, 'This is Where We Came In: The Audible Screen and the Voluble Audience of Early Sound Cinema', in *American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 147-148; Hagle, *C. Cretors & Co.*, 90.

<sup>235</sup> Lyons, 'What about the Popcorn?', 315.

<sup>236</sup> Butsch, *The Making of Modern Audiences*, 170.

referenced regularly throughout this thesis), but in not consulting additional sources, both primary and secondary, in order fully to understand the subject.

Scholars have also neglected important aspects of Gomery's interpretation of the period. While he maintains that it was because of the Great Depression that the concession stand was internalised within the movie industry, the way that his work has been cited by subsequent scholars does not accurately capture his interpretation in its entirety. While he makes no reference to candy vending machines, he does, for example, note that some independents had been selling confectionaries during the 1920s.<sup>237</sup> A seemingly minor detail, the absence of this caveat in subsequent accounts distorts the early history of the concession stand.

While stemming from *Shared Pleasures*, the inaccuracies in scholarly discourse on the concession stand's origins are a product of several causes largely unrelated to Gomery's work. The most important of these is a natural tendency within scholarship, as discussed in chapter one, not only to favour the experience of the studio-owned exhibition chains and metropolitan movie-going, but to present this as a universal experience. Gomery's narrative does lean towards a more universalised account, a result of the brief nature of his explanation. A concise yet nuanced account of the varied forms that the concession stand has taken over the last century was not possible in the few pages he dedicated to it. Unfortunately, rather than challenging Gomery, many scholars have chosen simply to perpetuate the status quo, resulting in the continuation of the 'Great Depression origin' narrative.

The flaws in the current scholarly narrative have already been analysed, but attention now turns to the biggest inaccuracy this chapter seeks to revise. While Gomery acknowledges that, in his words, 'some small neighbourhoods' sold pre-packaged confectionaries during the 1920s, he is firm in his stance that the concession stand originated as a direct consequence of

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<sup>237</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 79.

the Great Depression that began with the Wall Street Crash.<sup>238</sup> This thesis challenges Gomery's account. Building upon chapter one, the remainder of Part I of this chapter will argue that several of the major studio-owned exhibition chains had also been planning their entry into confectionary sales for several months prior to the events of October 1929.

### **'Silent Salesmen': Publix Embraces Candy**<sup>239</sup>

In February 1929, it was reported that the third largest vending machine contract in American history was on the verge of being signed.<sup>240</sup> The subject of much discussion and hype, this contract was significant not only for its value – it was worth a million-dollars – but also because it opened an entirely new market for the vending machine industry: the major studio-owned exhibition chains. As noted in chapter one, vending machines dispensing chewing gum and candy were operated by some independent movie-theatres from as early as 1914. For much of the 1920s, this type of vending was confined to independents. The 1929 contract was significant because it changed this. Undertaken by Publix, it meant that vending machines for the first time entered a major studio-owned exhibition chain. A chain, moreover, that by 1930 recorded over two million movie-goers visiting its 1,000 movie-theatres daily, with the chain dominating exhibition in many states – particularly those in New England, the Midwest, and Southwest.<sup>241</sup>

Under the management of Bruce Powell and Max Schosberg, the latter of who would go on to head the exhibition chain's newly created Lobby Merchandising Department (later known as the Candy Department) in 1929, Publix began considering vending machines from

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Anon., '\$25 "Silent Salesmen"', *Variety*, 86:1, January 19, 1927, 27.

<sup>240</sup> Harry W. Alexander, "'Robots' Multiply Sales Outlets', *Automatic Age*, 5:7, February 1929, 82.

<sup>241</sup> Douglas Gomery, 'The Movies Become Big Business: Publix Theatres and the Chain Store Strategy', *Cinema Journal*, 18:2, Economic and Technological History (Spring 1979), 32, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1225440>.

mid-1928.<sup>242</sup> The exhibition chain's interest had been piqued by independent movie-theatres' demonstration of how vending machines could provide an unobtrusive but lucrative source of extra income. Nicknamed the 'silent salesmen' by suppliers and film trade press magazines alike, vending machines' success derived from the machines' ability successfully to capitalise upon the impulse purchases of movie-goers.<sup>243</sup>

Initial trials took place in several of the chain's movie-theatres located throughout New York State and New England in late 1928.<sup>244</sup> A trial period of this kind was necessary for a number of reasons, the most important being it enabled the exhibition chain to discern whether candy vending would prove a good business decision. Commenting on this period, *Publix Opinion* reported that:

The Lobby Merchandising Department has been in an experimental stage for the last six months during which time an attempt was made to gauge the results of this theatrical by-product. So profitable have lobby vending machines been in thirty-five theatres in which they have been installed, and so insistent have been requests from managers for them, that it has been decided to spread this merchandising activity over the entire circuit. A considerable profit is realized from these sales with little effort.<sup>245</sup>

This trial period demonstrated that candy vending had the potential to offer significant monetary returns. The experience and knowledge gained during the trial helped Publix assess the best operational practices, for example, the optimal location and most popular gum and candy brands to use. This information was then used to ease the process of introducing vending machines into the rest of the chain's holdings. *Automatic Age* also took interest in this experimental phase, reporting that:

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<sup>242</sup> Anon., 'Extend Lobby Selling Over Circuit', *Publix Opinion*, 3:21, January 31, 1930, 3.

<sup>243</sup> Anon., '\$25 "Silent Salesmen"', *Variety*, 86:1, January 19, 1927, 27.

<sup>244</sup> Anon., 'Some Inspiring Notes Caught at the Convention', *Automatic Age*, 7:8, March 1931, 24-25.

<sup>245</sup> Anon., 'Extend Lobby Selling Over Circuit', *Publix Opinion*, 3:21, January 31, 1930, 3.

Managers of this chain have been experimenting with the sale of 5-cent chocolate bars in vending machines on the backs of theatre seats ... Chocolate vending machines are being developed which will require very little space, yet may be filled with a day's or week's supply ... The one-sale vendors are being replaced by six-cylinder machines.<sup>246</sup>

*Automatic Age*'s comments are valuable because they discuss an additional way in which Publix benefitted from this trial period. Not only did the exhibition chain find vending machines to be a viable addition to their movie-theatres but, more significantly, they identified ways in which the existing vending model would need to be changed better to suit their cinemas' needs.

Publix experimented with various vending machines during this period, most notably back-of-the-seat models, like the Midget. While this type of machine was successful in small independents, they were not as well-suited to larger venues, the primary reason for this being their small capacity.<sup>247</sup> Only able to hold a few sticks of gum, these machines were labour intensive, in that they needed replenishing after every performance. In deluxe movie-theatres with thousands of seats, this was an expensive and time-consuming task. As the *Automatic Age* excerpt indicates, by 1929 these impracticable back-of-the-seat vendors were making way for newer machines, models with larger capacities.

No longer compatible with being fixed to seats, new vending machine models were free-standing. Manufactured by Jones and Van Doran Inc. from New York, the Advance Vendola provides one example of such a model. There are no existing images, but a detailed description was included in an issue of *The Film Daily* from August 1927:

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<sup>246</sup> Harry W. Alexander, "“Robots” Multiply Sales Outlets", *Automatic Age*, 5:7, February 1929, 82.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

... the Advance Vendola, which is a multiple machine for vending candy, handkerchiefs, toilet articles and a wide variety of other merchandise ... is finished in a handsome mahogany cabinet, trimmed in nickel, with a French plate glass mirror at the top. Under the mirror is the display frame which is easily removable for dressing, the same as one might dress a show store window ... The space inside the base of this cabinet may be used for stock storage. The whole is mounted on ball casters, making it easy to move about.<sup>248</sup>

Free-standing and with increased storage space, models like the Advance Vendola made vending machines a much more attractive prospect for exhibitors. They also lent themselves to merchandising a variety of products, not just confectionaries. By the late 1920s, vending machines had also had made their way into movie-theatre restrooms, where they dispensed cosmetics and toiletries.

The Doehler-Hershey Sales Machine is another example of a free-standing machine which was in use by 1931. Produced in partnership with the popular American confectionary brand Hershey, this vending machine dispensed Hershey products exclusively, offering a variety of 5 cent bars, including ‘Hershey Almond Bar, Hershey Milk Chocolate Bar, Hershey Honeybar and Mr Goodbar.’<sup>249</sup> With a capacity of 72 chocolate bars, this machine had a much larger volume than previous back-of-seat models. Its size meant that it became no longer possible to confine free-standing vending machines of this type within the auditorium itself. Instead, they were relocated to the corners of movie-theatre lobbies and vestibules. The inclusion of some new features, for example, the wheels on the Advance Vendola, evidence how these machines could be quickly and easily relocated as and when needed.

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<sup>248</sup> Michael L. Simmons, ‘Added Revenue for Houses from “Advance Vendola”’, *The Film Daily*, 41:37, August 14, 1927, 10.

<sup>249</sup> Anon., ‘Doehler Machines Are Real Merchandisers’, *Automatic Age*, 7:7, February 1931, 68.

The new location of vending machines within the lobby was not without issues, however, as exhibitors had to ensure that they adhered to strict fire control regulations. This was particularly important in New York City, as tighter rules were imposed from 1931 – with authorities specifically targeting promotional stands and displays within lobbies. It is clear from trade press reports, however, that vending machines were not normally deemed a hazard because they were discretely tucked out of the way: ‘in most instances,’ noted a report in *Variety*, ‘the candy machines utilized are made as part of the columnar construction of lobbies.’<sup>250</sup> As the period progressed, movie-theatre architecture began to incorporate vending machines (and, by the mid-1930s, candy counters) into the design of the lobby space.<sup>251</sup>

The visual aesthetic of candy vending machines had always been an important consideration for exhibitors, but this became even more so after the transition to free-standing models. Situated in movie-theatre lobbies and foyers, they now had a more visible presence and needed to blend seamlessly into the building’s overall design. That this was an important factor is demonstrated by the increased importance that vending machine manufacturers and suppliers placed on highlighting their models’ sleek and modern stylings. *The Film Daily* suggested that candy vending machines did not just ‘serve the purpose of bringing in additional revenue, but are now obtainable in designs that add to the decoration of the house’.<sup>252</sup>

Publix’s own interest in vending machines was undoubtedly in part motivated by reports, deemed conservative by *Automatic Age*, that the vending machine industry would be worth over 25 million dollars by 1930.<sup>253</sup> While this was a bold estimate, the initial success of

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<sup>250</sup> Anon., ‘New N.Y. Fire Safety Requirements; Lobby Candy Stands Are Mentioned’, *Variety*, 102:4, April 8, 1931, 30.

<sup>251</sup> M. P. Booth, ‘Vending Machines Match Theater Architecture’, *The Film Daily*, 58:66, March 20, 1932, 6; Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 103.

<sup>252</sup> M. P. Booth, ‘Pointers and Suggestions’, *The Film Daily*, 55:103, May 3, 1931, 29.

<sup>253</sup> Harry W. Alexander, ‘“Robots” Multiply Sales Outlets’, *Automatic Age*, 5:7, February 1929, 74.

Publix's trial period in which 'sufficiently large' profits were made, must have helped to strengthen the exhibition chain's confidence in this new avenue of merchandising.<sup>254</sup>

Investment in this area was a sensible business decision that quickly became a demonstrable success. As previously noted, the exhibition chain did not fully commit to candy vending immediately, instead easing into confectionary sales with a trial period. The first phase of this, completed by January 1929, involved installing freestanding vending machines within 35 of its 1,200 movie-theatres, increasing to 50 by March 1929.<sup>255</sup> After a year of operation, in March 1930, Publix reported that confectionary sales in these 50 holdings had produced an annual profit of \$500,000.<sup>256</sup> A success financially, it was also well-received by audiences. According to *Variety*, 1 in 18 movie-goers made purchases, with the average sale estimated at 7 cents.<sup>257</sup> For context, the average cost of admission in 1929 was between 35 to 55 cents according to data provided by Valentine.<sup>258</sup> Chewing gum and candy proved so popular at one of the chain's deluxe holdings, the Paramount Theatre close to Times Square in New York, that 17 vending machines had to be operated in order to fulfil the high demand.<sup>259</sup> An unmitigated success, this initial trial gave Publix the confidence to commit further to candy vending machines.

It is important to highlight that the Paramount Theatre was one of the exhibition chain's grandest picture palaces. Modelled on the Paris Opera House and opened in 1926, the Paramount was one of the exhibition chain's 'flagship' movie-theatres, often used to première Paramount's newest film releases.<sup>260</sup> As discussed in chapter one, it was the studio-

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<sup>254</sup> Anon., 'Merchandizing Plan Set for Lobbies', *Publix Opinion*, 3:18, January 10, 1930, 11.

<sup>255</sup> Anon., 'Lobby Vending Machines Popular', *Publix Opinion*, 3:23, February 14, 1930, 11; Anon., 'Venders Make Huge Profit Possible', *Publix Opinion*, 3:27, March 14, 1930, 8.

<sup>256</sup> Anon., 'Candy Selling by Publix \$500,000 Year', *Variety*, 98:11, March 26, 1930, 3.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 195.

<sup>259</sup> William Ornstein, '17 in One House', *The Film Daily*, 51:75, March 30, 1930, 5.

<sup>260</sup> Ben M. Hall, 'The Best Remaining Seats', in *Exhibition: The Film Reader*, ed. Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 2002), 142.

owned exhibition chains that held the monopoly over America's picture palaces and first-run movie-theatres.<sup>261</sup> This is significant because it further undermines the accuracy of the traditional scholarly narrative of the concession stand during the 1920s. Candy vending machines may not have been installed until the close of the decade, but were eventually incorporated within the picture palaces. Chapter one discussed the prejudices that may have motivated the picture palaces to prohibit refreshments but, by the late 1920s, it is clear that attitudes were changing. Publix seemingly had no qualms or concerns relating to how its presence would impact the highbrow image of their most deluxe movie-theatres. A hit with audiences and hugely profitable, candy vending was simply good business.

In the months following, the Lobby Merchandising Department (charged under Schosberg's leadership with organising the installation of vending machines throughout the chain) accelerated this process. Commenting in July 1930, *Publix Opinion* reported how rapidly vending machines were spreading throughout the exhibition chain:

The candy sales department which started in New England and New York with approximately 40 machines less than a year ago, now has in operation more than 500 machines, covering the following states, New England, Connecticut, New York, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, Minnesota, Nebraska, Colorado, Utah, California, North and South Dakota, Michigan, Wisconsin and Washington ... He [Schosberg] said operations will be started within six weeks in the Southern division.<sup>262</sup>

As this demonstrates, what had initially begun in a small number of Publix's holdings rapidly spread across the country, to movie-theatres in both urban and rural areas. A hit with audiences, by 1930 candy vending machines were reportedly grossing on average \$7,000

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<sup>261</sup> Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, 111-112.

<sup>262</sup> Anon., 'Candy Machines Now Total 500', *Publix Opinion*, 3:43, July 4, 1930, 5.

from 115,000 sales per week.<sup>263</sup> By mid-1930, they had been installed in almost half of the exhibition chain's movie-theatres, a process which had been facilitated by the contract Publix secured with Pack Shops, Inc., a vending machine manufacturer and supplier.<sup>264</sup>

Since the turn of the twentieth century, as discussed in chapter one, it had been common for refreshments to be sold on a candy privilege basis at entertainment venues. This was true of the nation's nickelodeons but also of carnivals, fairs, and baseball parks. While most movie theatre independents during the 1920s internalised the concession stand, some carried on the practice of candy privilege in their operation of vending machines, using the same standard business model. Leasing lobby space, a vending machine supplier, such as Pack Shop, Inc., would install and maintain vending machines within movie-theatres, retaining any profits. A major national exhibition chain with its own department dedicated solely to vending management, it would not have benefitted Publix to operate in this way. As a result, Publix manipulated this practice better to suit its own needs.

Rather than contracting Pack Shops, Inc. on a candy privilege basis, Publix instead leased (later buying outright) the machines and took on the day-to-day maintenance responsibilities. Publix staff received training from Powell (then the deputy manager of the Candy Department), as well as two representatives of Pack Shops, so that they knew how properly to maintain the vending machines themselves.<sup>265</sup> The benefit of in-house management was that it was Publix (rather than Pack Shops) who profited most from the vending machines. Another advantage of this deal was that Pack Shops was a national supplier. Rather than having to make contracts with several regional suppliers, this deal meant that the installation of vending machines throughout the chain's movie-theatres was

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> William Ornstein, 'Pack Shops Closes Deal with Publix for Vendors', *The Film Daily*, 52:17, April 20, 1930, 7; Anon., 'Some Inspiring Notes Caught at the Convention' *Automatic Age*, 7:8, March 1931, 24-25.

<sup>265</sup> Anon., 'Candy Venders in Twin Cities', *Publix Opinion*, 3:41, June 20, 1930, 6.

seamless. In March 1930, for example, expansion into Publix's holdings in Chicago was rapid, and recorded significant profit immediately. This success was reported upon by *Variety*: 'Chicago figures on the subject show that the public is buying candy in the theatres. One week's income from two machines in the Roosevelt theatre, Chicago, netted \$128; at the United Artists, \$136; Tower, \$77; Oriental, \$343.'<sup>266</sup> Focusing specifically on selling candy and gum, the company hoped to expand its merchandising into other areas, for example, photographs of Hollywood stars and sheet music, although both of these would in reality prove less popular.<sup>267</sup> Deemed an 'outstanding example' by *Automatic Age*, Publix's success prompted other major studio-owned exhibition chains to embrace candy vending.<sup>268</sup> 'Publix's successful entry into the lobby merchandising field by the candy machine route', it was noted in *Variety*, 'has tempted other chains ... One of the chains already showing tangible proof is Fox',<sup>269</sup>

Initially trialling vending machines in a small number of their movie-theatres during early 1929, Fox Theatre Corporation quickly experienced similar levels of success as Publix. In March 1929, Aaron Fox, then the Vice-President and treasurer of Fox theatres, commented that: 'Automatic selling in our theatres ... have [sic] proved to be more profitable and satisfactory than any other method we have tried.'<sup>270</sup> By early 1930, the chain had secured a concession deal with the Laz-Fox Corporation for vending machines to be installed within all 800 of its movie-theatres.<sup>271</sup> RKO was also influenced by Publix's triumph with the 'nickel-

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<sup>266</sup> Anon., 'Lobby Buying May Extend to All Chains', *Variety*, 98:13, April 9, 1930, 26.

<sup>267</sup> Anon., 'Inside Stuff – Pictures', *Variety*, 106:7, April 26, 1932, 41.

<sup>268</sup> John S. Marratt, 'Cigarettes in Miniature', *Automatic Age*, 7:10, May 1931, 67.

<sup>269</sup> Anon., 'Lobby Buying May Extend To All Chains', *Variety*, 98:13, April 9, 1930, 26.

<sup>270</sup> Anon., 'Modern Vending Machines', *Automatic Age*, 5:8, March 1929, 67.

<sup>271</sup> This deal with Laz-Fox Corp. saw the installation of candy vending machine throughout the Fox exhibition circuit, but the deal would become the subject of much controversy in subsequent months. Laz-Fox Corp. was partly owned by Aaron Fox (brother of William Fox, the founder of the Fox Film Corporation and Fox West Coast Theatres exhibition chain) and, consequently, the deal was considered nepotistic. In September 1930, citing unfair business competition, Fox Theatres called for the removal of all vending machines from their movie-theatres. This broke the exhibition chain's 5-year contract with Laz-Fox Corp., resulting in Laz-Fox Corp. filing an injunction against Fox. This

getters'.<sup>272</sup> Following Publix and Fox's success, RKO ordered the immediate installation of candy vending machines within all of its movie-theatres in August 1930.<sup>273</sup> The success of its competitors provided enough confidence to forego a trial period. Candy vending proved so successful that RKO quickly expanded into another area, cosmetics. By December 1932, a deal had been signed for the installation of cosmetic vending machines throughout the chain's holdings. Unlike Publix, however, RKO operated its merchandising on a privilege basis, thereby receiving only a share (reportedly 25 percent) of the profits from both candy and cosmetics sales.<sup>274</sup>

With profits totalling one billion dollars in 1932 (a significant proportion of which came from sales at the nation's movie-theatres), the vending industry was thriving.<sup>275</sup> A proven and stable business opportunity, by mid-1930 three of America's largest studio-owned exhibition chains had committed to this non-filmic exhibition practice. The majors' investment in candy vending represents a highly important (but overlooked) moment in the history of the concession stand. Focusing on the emergence of candy vending and small concession operations in independent movie-theatres, chapter one raised important questions about the accuracy of existing scholarship on the concession stand during the 1920s, a decade in which scholars maintain that food was absent from American movie-theatres. The acceptance of vending machines by several of the leading studio-owned exhibition chains in the months preceding the Wall Street Crash raises additional questions about the accuracy of current scholarship of the early concession stand.

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case was eventually settled in early 1931, with Fox's reinstallation of candy vending machines, using newer, more attractive models supplied by Laz-Fox Corp. Anon., 'Relatives Charge Assailed by Fox', *Motion Picture News*, 41:6, February 8, 1930, 41; Anon., 'Fox Throws Out Candy Machines; Fox Throws Out Lobby Acts and Fox Protecting Local Merchants', *Variety*, 100:10, September 17, 1930, 4; Anon., 'Slightly Candy Slot Back in Fox Houses', *Variety*, 101:11, February 25, 1931, 19.

<sup>272</sup> Anon., 'Lobby Machines and R-K-O', *Variety*, 100:4, August 6, 1930, 25.

<sup>273</sup> Anon., 'R-K-O Managers Told to Go Heavy on Stage Shows – Variety, R-K-O's Ace', *Variety*, 100:5, August 13, 1930, 19.

<sup>274</sup> Anon., 'Cosmetics in Machines', *Variety*, 100:3, December 27, 1932, 4.

<sup>275</sup> Anon., 'News From the Dailies: East', *Variety*, 108:3, September 27, 1932, 46.

The chronology is critical here: it is important to recognise that a difference of a few months radically alters the context in which developments were occurring. Scholars maintain that it was from the economic desperation surrounding the onset of the Great Depression that exhibitors began to look to other means of making a profit. An estimated 80 million were reported to have attended the movie-theatre weekly in 1929, a significant increase from the 50 million recorded in 1926, the year before the transition to sound began.<sup>276</sup> When Publix signed the candy vending contract in February 1929, American film exhibition was booming. Exhibitors had no foresight of the events that would occur in the months and years following October 1929, so in the case of Publix and Fox, at least, it is inaccurate to suggest that their engagement with candy vending could, in any way, have been motivated at the outset by the Great Depression. It seems more reasonable to suggest that both exhibition chains were encouraged by the success being had by independent exhibitors, who had proven that there was a market for confectionary goods within the nation's movie-theatres. This was confirmed when they both conducted their own trial periods.<sup>277</sup> As the country's largest exhibition circuits, they were in a good position to install vending machines rapidly into their own holdings, as they successfully did. If there was any economic motivation, other than confectionaries being an easy source of additional revenue, it is more likely that it was other factors, for instance, the costly empire-building and conversion to sound, rather than the Great Depression, which encouraged this development.

By the mid-1920s, the major Hollywood studios were in the midst of building their large exhibition empires, the years 1925/26 marking the second big wave of movie-theatre buying and construction.<sup>278</sup> Chapter one discussed the beginning of this process and, by 1927/28, each of the major Hollywood studios had grown to control hundreds of movie-

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<sup>276</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 195.

<sup>277</sup> Anon., 'Lobby Vending Machines Popular', *Publix Opinion*, 3:23, February 14, 1930, 11.

<sup>278</sup> Gomery, *The Coming of Sound*, 11.

theatres each, with no immediate plans to stop accumulating holdings. Publix owned nearly 1,200 movie-theatres by 1930, including, as previously mentioned, prominent picture palaces like the Paramount Theatre in New York City.<sup>279</sup> Its geographical grip had also expanded: Publix dominated film exhibition on the East Coast, Midwest, and the South.<sup>280</sup> This was a situation replicated by other studio-owned exhibition chains. Fox, for instance, owned 1,000 movie-theatres by 1930, including Rothafel's Roxy Theatre which had been acquired for 5 million dollars.<sup>281</sup> Hollywood's exhibition empire-building throughout the 1920s was facilitated by heavy investment and borrowing from Wall Street investment firms.<sup>282</sup> Fox, for example, had borrowed close to 30 million dollars from Halsey, Stuart and Company of New York and the Telephone Company by late 1929, the money partly used to expand its exhibition chain.<sup>283</sup> It is important to highlight the relationship shared by the Hollywood studios and major investment and financial firms because it demonstrates yet another way in which the studio-owned exhibition chains were in a privileged position over smaller independents. A position that would further advantage them from 1927, with the introduction of sound technology.

Publix's Vice-President Executive Sam Dembow dubbed the conversion to sound the 'most important development' within cinema.<sup>284</sup> Warner Bros., then one of America's smaller film studios, had been the first to commit to sound in 1926, their success paving the way for the other studio-owned exhibition chains in the following months, Publix committing in May 1928.<sup>285</sup> *Publix Opinion* reported that sound was well received within their movie-theatres,

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<sup>279</sup> Kinerk and Wilhelm, *Popcorn Palaces*, 18.

<sup>280</sup> Gomery, 'Fashioning an Exhibition Empire', 124.

<sup>281</sup> Solomon, *Twentieth Century-Fox*, 11.

<sup>282</sup> Grieveson, *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations*, 247; Kinerk and Wilhelm, *Popcorn Palaces*, 17-18; Balio, *Grand Design*, 21, 23.

<sup>283</sup> Solomon, *Twentieth Century-Fox*, 12.

<sup>284</sup> Anon., 'Sound-Picture Policies Set', *Publix Opinion*, 2:30, July 14, 1928, 1.

<sup>285</sup> Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926-1931* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1997), 11; Gomery, *The Coming of Sound*, 1; Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 69.

attributing the dramatic surge in attendance, in the years up to 1930, to the success and popularity of this new technology.<sup>286</sup> The transition from silent to sound was an expensive one because, as well as refitting the studios to produce ‘talkies’, movie-theatres themselves had to be wired for sound. With the support of the Hollywood studios and significant investment and borrowing from private investment firms and banks, however, for the studio-owned exhibition chains this process was ‘fast, orderly, and profitable’.<sup>287</sup> As Gomery has described it, conversion was ‘hardly a ripple’ to the larger exhibition chains because any expense was quickly recouped by the increase in box-office profits.<sup>288</sup> In contrast, independent exhibitors, particularly those in more rural areas, struggled to finance and undertake this process. Movie-theatres away from the metropolises and major cities transitioned to sound at a much slower pace, with some fourth and fifth-run houses not completing the process till the late 1930s.<sup>289</sup>

The Hollywood studios and their exhibition branches were in a strong position by late 1928. The transition to sound was near completion, and many first-run houses – by this point, almost exclusively owned by the studio-owned exhibition chains – used the new technology as an opportunity to raise admission prices.<sup>290</sup> Already popular with the American public, sound created an added incentive to visit the movie-theatre and, subsequently, attendance and box office profits increased. Empire building and the conversion to sound were both expensive processes, but they had immediate pay-off.<sup>291</sup> There is no tangible reason as to why America’s largest and most profitable exhibition chains decided to install candy vending machines from late 1928. It was not out of economic desperation as the traditional scholarly narrative claims.

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<sup>286</sup> Anon., ‘Sound-Picture Policies Set’, *Publix Opinion*, 2:30, July 14, 1928, 1.

<sup>287</sup> Gomery, *The Coming of Sound*, 5; Balio, *Grand Design*, 21, 23.

<sup>288</sup> Gomery ‘Fashioning an Exhibition Empire’, 129.

<sup>289</sup> Crafton, *The Talkies*, 253-255; Waller, ‘Imagining and Promoting the Small-Town Theater’, 170.

<sup>290</sup> Solomon, *Twentieth Century-Fox*, 10.

<sup>291</sup> Gomery, ‘Fashioning an Exhibition Empire’ 129-130.

If not out of economic necessity, then what? One plausible reason can be glimpsed in *Publix Opinion*. An article from September 1928 reported that, while business was good, Publix's management team was aware that this success might not last indefinitely, and that there was a need to prepare for all eventualities:

... at no time in the history of the industry have theatres been faced with such an abundance of sure-fire box office attractions as are now lined up for Publix theatres. Amplifying that thought was the logical conclusion that while this happy condition is present, lowest operating costs should be firmly established, so that a 'cushion' or bulwark may be had for future eventualities should the supply cease or diminish.<sup>292</sup>

Candy vending is not referenced explicitly though this report did coincide with Publix's initial trial of candy vending machines – an action that was part of a wider movement by the exhibition chain to commercialise its vast lobby spaces. It was from October 1928, for instance, that sheet music also began to be sold within the chain's movie-theatres.<sup>293</sup>

Independents were seen to be having success with candy so, from a business perspective, it made sense for Publix and the other major studio-owned exhibition chains to do the same.

While the process of integrating vending machines into their large holdings of cinemas continued into the Depression years, the actions of the major studio-owned exhibition chains, notably Publix and Fox, were based upon decisions that predated the economic decline. A cataclysmic event in American history, the Great Depression had a significant impact on the film industry, specifically its exhibition sector, so it is understandable why scholars have ascribed it such an important role in the history of the concession stand. As has been discussed here (as well as in chapter one), however, by doing

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<sup>292</sup> Anon., 'Publix Leaders in Convention: Future Policies Outlined to District and Division Leaders at N.Y. Conference', *Publix Opinion*, 2:35, September 29, 1928, 1.

<sup>293</sup> Anon., 'Sheet Music Lobby Sale Film-Plug', *Publix Opinion*, 2:36, October 13, 1928, 1, 4.

this, they have presented a simplified and inaccurate account. Archival evidence builds a strong case that the concession stand was thriving in American movie-theatres – both independent and studio-owned, rural small-town and urban – prior to the economic decline produced by the Great Depression. While the Depression itself was not the immediate catalyst for the widespread introduction of refreshments into American movie-houses, the remainder of the chapter analyses whether it nonetheless played a role in shaping the development of this non-filmic exhibition practice.

## **Part II: The Fight for Survival, 1929-1935**

### **‘Our Business Was Not Depression-Proof’: Reality Hits Hollywood<sup>294</sup>**

The Wall Street Crash of October 1929 precipitated a catastrophic slump in most sectors of the American economy. In his history of the New Deal, Jason Scott Smith concisely captured some of the worst consequences of the Crash, describing how ‘just between the years 1929 and 1933, over one hundred thousand businesses were forced to close. Corporate profits plummeted 90 percent, from \$10 billion to \$1 billion, while unemployment climbed to record heights.’<sup>295</sup> Despite the severe economic depression afflicting virtually all other aspects of American life, however, in the months following the crash the film industry continued to prosper, something many attributed to the introduction of sound.<sup>296</sup> Whilst conversion was costly, it was an expensive risk that had immediate pay-off. As Fuller-Seeley has described it:

The film exhibition business had experienced an unprecedented boom in 1929, due to the astonishing popularity of the new talking pictures ... Movie

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<sup>294</sup> Anon., “‘We Must Return to Fundamentals!’ Theatre, Not Circuit, Unit of Operation’, *Publix Opinion*, 4:2, January 23, 1931, 9.

<sup>295</sup> Smith, *A Concise History of the New Deal*, 18.

<sup>296</sup> Perkins, ‘Writing the Script’, 290.

attendance had nearly doubled in four years, skyrocketing from 55 million admissions weekly in 1925 to 110 million in 1929 ...<sup>297</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the stock market crash, people continued to attend movie theatres with much the same dedication they had in the years before, to the film industry's immense relief. Buoyed by increased attendance figures, Hollywood believed itself untouchable – a belief evidenced by *The Film Daily's* claim in June 1930 that 'Movies are an American habit and now that more people than ever have been drawn to the picture houses by sound, any sharp falling off in attendance is unlikely.'<sup>298</sup> Hollywood was confident that movie-going had become an important and engrained leisure activity, a habit that would survive the economic downturn. If anything, it believed that its continued prosperity was guaranteed with film providing a much-needed outlet for the depression-stricken American public by means of entertainment and escapism.

In the dire economic conditions of the early 1930s, Hollywood held firm in its belief that weekly attendance at the movie-theatre provided the American public with a brief respite from the hardship of their everyday lives. There is an abundance of scholarship connected to this idea, typically focused on a close analysis of the narratives and genres of films from the era which were designed with escapism in mind.<sup>299</sup> In the months immediately following the 1929 crash, this movie industry confidence was emboldened by a dramatic surge in movie-theatre attendance levels. The year 1930 broke all box office records up till that time with an estimated 80 million attending weekly.<sup>300</sup> As a result, Hollywood's confidence in its ability to weather the Great Depression unscathed only strengthened. This was a brave (even

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<sup>297</sup> Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley, 'Dish Night at the Movies: Exhibitor Promotions and Female Audiences during the Great Depression', in *Looking Past the Screen: Case Studies in American Film History and Method*, ed. Jon Lewis and Eric Smoodin (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 248.

<sup>298</sup> Anon., 'Attendance Not Likely to Have Drastic Drop', *The Film Daily*, 52:59, June 9, 1930, 6.

<sup>299</sup> See, for example: Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression America and Its Films* (Chicago: I. R. Dee, 1992); Balio, *Grand Design*, 179-312.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

foolhardy) position to maintain in an economic climate which crippled most other aspects of industry and society. Despite initially prospering, Hollywood's bravado soon faded with the realisation that nothing was immune to the Great Depression. Following the high of 1930, weekly attendance rapidly stagnated and declined, falling to 70 million in 1931, a figure which continued to plummet in the following years.<sup>301</sup> Despite the box office slowly beginning to pick up by 1935, it would not fully recover to pre-Depression highs until 1940.<sup>302</sup>

While the Hollywood film studios continued to cling to their optimistic outlook, it was the frontline of the film industry, exhibition, which first felt the Great Depression's true effects. In the months following 1930, it quickly became apparent to exhibitors in all levels and locales that the American *habit* of movie-going was increasingly under threat. In 1930 an estimated 23,000 movie theatres operated across America, but by 1932 (the winter of 1932-33 was the worst period of the Depression) at least 8,000 had been forced to close.<sup>303</sup> Sam Katz, then the President of Publix, captured the emerging attitude of many American exhibitors in early 1931 when he commented: 'When the recession came in 1930, we awoke to the fact that our business was not depression-proof'.<sup>304</sup> The Hollywood studios still had plenty of stories to tell, but increasingly no audiences to consume them.

As has been previously discussed, attendance at movie-theatres during the 1920s had boomed. Whilst many Americans did not watch films within the lavish surroundings of the picture palace, across the country millions were attending a range of cinemas on a regular basis. Film's meteoric popularity can be attributed to many things, for example, the introduction of sound from 1927, but it is important to acknowledge that the increased leisure

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 70.

<sup>303</sup> Fuller-Seeley, "What the Picture", 188; McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 134.

<sup>304</sup> Anon., "'We Must Return to Fundamentals!' Theatre, Not Circuit, Unit of Operation", *Publix Opinion*, 4:2, January 23, 1931, 9.

time and higher wages that many Americans experienced during the twenties were an important contributing factor.<sup>305</sup> With a ticket costing on average 50 cents prior to October 1929, this was a leisure activity that many had the means to enjoy regularly.<sup>306</sup> Drawn by the moving images and (towards the latter half of the decade) the lure of talkies, weekly movie-going became an affordable treat – with many visiting several times a week. The effects of the Great Depression meant that for a large percentage of the population in the following decade this was no longer the case.

Perhaps the most damaging consequence of the Great Depression, in regards to the American public at least, was the mass unemployment that afflicted the country. As Hugh Brogan has pithily described it, ‘Soon the only rising curve in the statistics was that of unemployment. It was five million at the end of 1930, nine million at the end of 1931, thirteen million at the end of 1932.’<sup>307</sup> This was a rapid escalation of the percentage of the population who were unemployed, with one fifth of the population out of work by early 1933.<sup>308</sup> Even those who retained a job were not guaranteed stability or security. Many saw reductions in wages and working hours, and by mid-1932 three-quarters of America’s workforce worked on a part-time basis only.<sup>309</sup> High levels of unemployment put a huge strain on family incomes, and by 1933 it is estimated Americans on average had only 54 percent of the income they had had in 1929.<sup>310</sup> Non-essential spending was, in many households, cut dramatically.<sup>311</sup> The sudden decrease in weekly movie-theatre attendance in the years following 1930 is testament to this: an estimated 90 million attending in 1930

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<sup>305</sup> Fuller-Seeley, ‘Dish Night’, 248.

<sup>306</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 195.

<sup>307</sup> Brogan, *The Penguin History of the USA*, 514.

<sup>308</sup> Smith, *A Concise History of the New Deal*, 1.

<sup>309</sup> Susan Kellogg and Steven Mintz, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1988), 134.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>311</sup> McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 73.

declined to 75 million in 1931, a figure which fell further to 60 million by 1932.<sup>312</sup> It is likely, according to Fuller-Seeley, that in reality the situation was much more dire: the film industry was renowned for inflating attendance data.<sup>313</sup> A cataclysmic event for the American population, the Great Depression left many families struggling to subsist, let alone afford to maintain their weekly movie-going habit.

Some areas of America were more severely affected than others, and this is reflected in the difficult conditions faced by exhibitors. The Midwest, for example, was particularly hard hit. Over the course of the Depression years, the area suffered a movie-theatre closure rate of approximately 22 to 47 percent.<sup>314</sup> Fuller-Seeley has used this data to reinforce her argument that small-town theatres were the hardest hit at this time; not only by the economic depression but also through increasing marginalisation by the urban-centric film industry.<sup>315</sup> She evidences this by citing the number of small-town movie-theatres that were forced to close, a figure that was much higher than that of urban areas:

One of the few tangible figures that shows the Depression's impact on smaller theaters was the percentage of movie houses that were forced to close. The number of open movie theaters declined by 35 percent, from 23,000 to fewer than 15,000. In 1933, 30.5 percent of all theaters were still closed, and 25 percent remained shuttered in 1934.<sup>316</sup>

Fuller-Seeley argues that rural movie-theatres, located on the periphery, lacked the resources, population, and studio support that many urban movie-theatres enjoyed. In many respects, she is correct. The Midwest was a largely rural area, with a high percentage of movie-theatres located in lesser populated areas. Independents were a lot more highly concentrated in these

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<sup>312</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 195.

<sup>313</sup> Fuller-Seeley, 'Dish Night', 249.

<sup>314</sup> Fuller-Seeley, "What the Picture", 188.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> Fuller-Seeley, 'Dish Night', 249.

types of locales and did unquestionably struggle. Archival research, however, suggests that exhibitors in major cities suffered just as badly.

While the data for the Midwest is largely composed of small-town movie-theatres, it does also include major cities like Chicago, Pittsburgh and Minneapolis. During 1930 and 1931, *Variety* was littered with reports about the problems facing exhibitors in Minneapolis, a city it described as ‘failing to demonstrate depression-proof qualities.’<sup>317</sup> Losing custom to unemployment, other leisure pursuits, and even the weather, the poor conditions faced by exhibitors in Minneapolis were not unique, but echoed those in other major cities across America. In June 1931, for example, a combination of hot weather, a visiting circus, and the impact of the Great Depression meant that exhibition reached a new low in Philadelphia.<sup>318</sup> An article in *Publix Opinion* from 1931 further challenges Fuller-Seeley’s analysis. Katz suggested that it was exhibitors in urban areas who struggled the hardest adapting to the conditions of Depression-era America. Having previously spent excessively on promotional stunts and the movie-theatre interior, he believed that the deluxe urban houses were ill-prepared for the new economic conditions.<sup>319</sup> The Depression was apparently not discriminatory in its effects, crippling urban and metropolitan exhibitors as well.

It is necessary to reiterate that the most crucial distinction lies not in small-town versus urban but in independents versus studio-owned theatres. To fund their exhibition empires, the Hollywood studios had borrowed extensively from Wall Street financiers and banks throughout the 1920s, loans which in the wake of the Wall Street Crash ‘went bad’.<sup>320</sup> Controlling hundreds of movie-theatres across a large geographical area and holding the monopoly over the nation’s picture palaces, venues with thousands of seats, the studio-owned

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<sup>317</sup> Anon., ‘Minneapolis Pretty Badly Shot’, *Variety*, 99:4, May 7, 1930, 9.

<sup>318</sup> Anon., ‘Business Weak In First Run Pittsburgh Houses’, *Exhibitors’ Forum*, 7:5, June 2, 1931, 4.

<sup>319</sup> Anon., “‘We Must Return to Fundamentals!’ Theatre, Not Circuit, Unit of Operation’, *Publix Opinion*, 4:2, January 23, 1931, 9.

<sup>320</sup> Kinerk and Wilhelm, *Popcorn Palaces*, 21.

exhibition chains were overstretched. Picture palaces were stripped of their additional extras in an attempt to cut operating costs: the elaborate stage shows stopped, fresh flowers disappeared, and they ran on a skeleton staff comprised largely of teenagers who could be paid less.<sup>321</sup> Movie-theatres were sold off in an attempt to survive, but ultimately several of America's largest studio-owned exhibition chains declared bankruptcy during the early 1930s, Fox and RKO among them, with Publix entering voluntary receivership.<sup>322</sup> This sounds worse than it was in reality. Receivership status, as Balio has argued, 'enabled distressed companies to protect their assets for the benefit of investors while a court-approved plan was worked out to pay creditors in an orderly fashion.'<sup>323</sup> The studio-owned exhibition chains were able to operate throughout the Depression period, still drawing audiences, and by the mid-1930s had all reorganised and recovered.<sup>324</sup> The studio-owned exhibition chains struggled unquestionably, but never to the same extent as independent exhibitors.

Regardless of the financial hardship that the major Hollywood studios encountered during the Depression years, their exhibition chains were still in a highly privileged position. They had the support and power of Hollywood behind them and, most importantly, access to the newest film releases – films that many rural exhibitors at the time accused of appealing solely to urban tastes.<sup>325</sup> First-run studio status enabled them to charge higher admission prices, while independents had to wait until a film's third, fourth or even fifth run. While the studio-owned exhibition chains held significant power and influence, in terms of sheer number, it was independents – heavily concentrated in rural areas and small-towns – who were in the majority at this time. Reporting in 1931, the *Exhibitors' Forum* (an earlier version of *Boxoffice*) stated that 'Of the 15,000 theatres now open, 10,000 are being operated by

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<sup>321</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 72.

<sup>322</sup> Kinerk and Wilhelm, *Popcorn Palaces*, 21.

<sup>323</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 15-16.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>325</sup> Fuller-Seeley, "What the Picture", 191.

independent theatre owners'.<sup>326</sup> Accounting for the majority of physical movie-theatres, it was also independents who accounted for the highest closure rate as the Great Depression wore on.<sup>327</sup> As the following section will argue, from 1930 independent exhibitors could no longer rely solely upon film if they wanted to survive.

### **'The Public is Willing to Spend Its Money': A Change in Tactic**<sup>328</sup>

Unemployment may have been rife, but the American entertainment market had not completely collapsed in the wake of the Great Depression. This meant that film exhibitors – battling the stagnated market caused by the Great Depression – also faced increased competition from the growing popularity of alternative (often cheaper) entertainments. Spectatorship at sporting events, for example, became popular during the early 1930s, much to the chagrin of film exhibitors. Baseball spectatorship grew dramatically, as did public attendance at other sporting events, such as dog racing.<sup>329</sup> 'The fact that wrestling matches, boxing bouts and baseball parks are drawing capacity audiences and that higher priced seats are the first to be sold out', *Exhibitors' Forum* commented in 1931, 'is further proof that the public is willing to spend its money.'<sup>330</sup> This was an important realisation. While the Great Depression put pressure on the American public's purses, people still wanted entertainment. Many were just choosing not to spend their limited incomes on films. Trade press magazines,

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<sup>326</sup> Anon., 'Ten Thousand Indies', *Exhibitors' Forum*, 7:9, June 30, 1931, 9.

<sup>327</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 15.

<sup>328</sup> Ben Shlyen, 'The Last Word: A Problem and Its Solution', *Exhibitors' Forum*, 7:5, June 2, 1931, 18.

<sup>329</sup> Ben Shlyen, 'Straws in the Wind', *Boxoffice*, 29:21, October 17, 1936, 3; Anon., 'Dog Racing May Be Heavy Rival for Mass. Dough', *Boxoffice*, 26:9, January 26, 1935, 3.

<sup>330</sup> Ben Shlyen, 'The Last Word: A Problem and Its Solution', *Exhibitors' Forum*, 7:5, June 2, 1931, 18.

echoing the sentiments of many exhibitors, particularly independents, began to link the attendance downturn to the poor quality of Hollywood's output at this time.<sup>331</sup>

By 1931, overshadowed by the economic desperation of the American populace and facing increased competition from other entertainments, film alone could no longer lure sufficiently large audiences in many places. To stand any chance of survival, exhibitors had to look to other means to drum up business. This was particularly true of independents, who were in a disadvantaged position when compared to the bigger studio-owned exhibition chains. It was not simply that independents lacked the financial support of the Hollywood studios, the studios actively conspired with each other in an effort to limit independent exhibitors' access to new film releases. Vertical integration meant that they had control over the distribution channels.<sup>332</sup> Many independents were forced, therefore, to forge a new movie-going experience, one in which film was not always the primary motivation for attendance. For the remainder of the 1930s, a myriad of non-filmic exhibition practices entered the American movie-theatre in an attempt to draw movie-goers. These developments occurred in two overlapping phases. The first, between 1930 and 1935, saw a number of short-term emergency measures introduced, and the second, from 1936 to 1939, witnessed the introduction of more measured, longer-term alterations to the movie-theatre space. It is the former phase, the years 1930-35, that many scholars regard as the true origin of the concession stand. The remainder of Part II of this chapter discusses these short-term fixes in order to determine whether the concession stand should be considered amongst the emergency exhibition measures that emerged during these years.

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<sup>331</sup> Anon., 'Acute Shortage of Film Impends', *New England Film News*, 9:11, July 14, 1932, 5; Fuller-Seeley, "'What the Picture'", 189, 191.

<sup>332</sup> H. O. Kusell, 'Bank Night (1936)', in Waller, ed., *Moviegoing in America*, 189.

## Emergency Measures, 1930-1935

### i. Price Cutting and Double Features

In order to compete and effectively attract movie-goers, exhibitors across America realised that they needed to employ new tactics. Initially exhibitors turned to two failsafe methods: double features and price cutting. Implemented quickly by many exhibitors, these combined policies were a logical strategy for movie-theatres to adopt. Both practices appealed to the Depression-era consumer. Price-cutting made movie-going more affordable, and double features made it more attractive as audiences got more for their money: two feature films in the programme for the price of one. Widely used in movie-theatres throughout America, both exhibition practices were undeniably quick fixes. Necessary in the short term, as the period progressed, both would later draw increased scrutiny and criticism from within the film industry.

Unlike many of the other depression-era practices which would emerge, price-cutting was a policy that had, by 1931, been adopted by exhibitors at all levels and in all locales. While many independents would slash their prices to extreme lows, the major studio-owned exhibition chains also understood the need to do this, albeit in a more conservative way. In an article reporting on the Fox West Coast manager's decision to lower prices, *Variety* astutely commented that: 'Houses should adjust themselves ... to shifting population and changing character of neighborhoods during the past 18 months.'<sup>333</sup> Published in 1931, this demonstrates that the reality of the period was settling in. Independents had been struggling for months already, but now the major studio-affiliated chains were beginning to feel the effects of the Depression as well. Despite taking a firm stance in March 1930, in declaring

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<sup>333</sup> Anon., 'F-WC Cutting Admish', *Variety*, 102:12, June 2, 1931, 25.

that it would not engage in the ‘danger’ that was price cutting, by 1932 even Publix was forced to concede on this point.<sup>334</sup>

Prices were lowered gradually. Many exhibitors had reduced admission from the pre-depression average price of 1 dollar to 50 cents by mid-1930, but by December of the same year this had further fallen to 35 cents.<sup>335</sup> While the major studio-owned exhibition chains froze prices at this level, independents would often cut them further. By 1932, many had again slashed admission prices with the average price of a ticket costing 15 cents or less, a decision that was met with relative success. The Garrick movie-theatre in Minneapolis is a prime example of the potential of slashing prices, transformed in a short space of time from a ‘consistent loser’ to a theatre that was making \$1,500 a week.<sup>336</sup> The movie-theatre was transformed by major revisions of its weekly programme: it began to play older films and double features, with admission priced at just ten cents. One of many ten-cent houses which cropped up across America during the Great Depression, the Garrick was emblematic of the price-cutting much of Hollywood itself wanted to stop.

Likened to a ‘disease’ and a highly destructive ‘epidemic’, both double features and price-cutting faced severe hostility from within the film industry.<sup>337</sup> While they effectively generated income for many exhibitors, the Hollywood studios (supported by trade press publications, like *Variety*) opposed their use. The Hollywood studios opposed such practices because they feared they cheapened film, though an unspoken concern was also that they made independent movie-theatres a source of competition for their own exhibition chains. In July 1932, for example, Paramount resolutely refused to rent its films to any movie-theatre which practiced extreme price cutting or double features, in what the *New England Film*

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<sup>334</sup> Anon., ‘No Prices to Be Cut In Publix’, *Publix Opinion*, 3:29, March 28, 1930, 1.

<sup>335</sup> Crafton, *The Talkies*, 190-191.

<sup>336</sup> Anon., ‘\$1,500 Weekly from 10c 2D Runs’, *Variety*, 105:5, January 12, 1932, 21.

<sup>337</sup> Anon., ‘Go Wild on Price Cutting’, *Variety*, 104:13, December 8, 1931, 9.

*News* (an early iteration of what would become *Boxoffice*) deemed an attempt to ‘protect first-run neighborhood houses into whose grosses the dimers eat heavily.’<sup>338</sup> Neither of these practices, particularly price cutting, were viable long-term solutions as there was a limit to how low prices could be slashed. Given the nature of the Great Depression, however, both proved effective short-term fixes for many independent exhibitors, their nationwide implementation indicative of just how bad conditions in the early 1930s were.

While effective in attracting audiences, the real significance of both practices lay in the realisation they provoked: exhibitors could appeal to customers by catering to their needs. While a second- or third-rate independent might not have been able to offer its patrons the newest Hollywood film release or the same grandiose surroundings as a first-run theatre, small exhibitors knew their local community.<sup>339</sup> With this knowledge, exhibitors could find other ways to tailor their movie-theatre to appeal directly to the material needs of their neighbourhood, drumming up greater custom for their business as a result. No longer the primary draw, the wider movie-going experience, particularly non-filmic exhibition practices, became critical.

## **ii. Premium Giveaways and Dish Night**

Elaborate stunts and giveaways had been the norm in the 1920s, used by both Hollywood studios and exhibitors to generate interest in the latest feature film releases. The elaborateness of these stunts ranged dramatically: from exhibitors recreating film sets in their lobbies to a lion being released into a New York hotel to promote *The Return of Tarzan* in 1920.<sup>340</sup> Stunts and giveaways continued into the Depression years but with a drastically different motivation. Less concerned with promoting individual films, by the early 1930s they were

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<sup>338</sup> Anon., ‘Paramount Hits Dimers and Duals’, *New England Film News*, 9:12, July 21, 1932, 8.

<sup>339</sup> Klenotic, “Four Hours’ of Hootin’ and Hollerin”, 148.

<sup>340</sup> Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment*, 38-41.

used instead to promote individual movie-theatres, and act as a much-needed ‘attendance-stimulator’.<sup>341</sup> Giveaways (otherwise known as ‘premiums’) were a widespread practice across America from 1931, with exhibitors offering literally anything and everything as prizes. Cars, fridges, and radios were all popular goods offered in 1931 and 1932.<sup>342</sup> This eclectic array of premiums reflects exhibitors’ desperate struggles to identify the right giveaways which would fill movie-theatre seats.

A practice largely confined to independent exhibitors, by the peak of their popularity in 1933 giveaways had evolved into a structured, sustainable, and highly successful exhibition practice. By this time, small towns across America were obsessed with these events, and *Variety* regularly commented on the ‘premium *frenzy*’ which had overtaken the Midwest, a particular giveaway hotspot.<sup>343</sup> The key to this success lay in their transformation from highly disorganised *ad hoc* occurrences to a series of scheduled, targeted events. Weeknights – particularly Monday and Tuesdays – were slow nights for movie-theatres, and in an effort to combat this a series of targeted weekly giveaways developed. Unlike the earlier period when a one-off event offered the chance to win luxury items, the new giveaway model centred around offering less expensive goods, items that exhibitors could bulk buy at a low whole-sale price which was then easily recouped in ticket sales. The mechanics of Depression-era giveaways were that audiences would attend their local movie-theatre, pay for admission to the film, and receive an item from whatever premium set was billed for that night. The weekly schedule of the Pastime Theatre in Marlboro, a small-town in Massachusetts, offers a good representation of the range of goods available at American movie-theatres and also just how organised these events had become by 1933: ‘... pyralin

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<sup>341</sup> Kusell, ‘Bank Night’, 190.

<sup>342</sup> Anon., ‘Valuable Prizes for Give-Away Nights’, *New England Film News*, 8:21, March 24, 1932, 14; Anon., ‘Another Auto Give-Away’, *Publix Opinion*, 4:19, September 11, 1931, 5.

<sup>343</sup> Anon., ‘Midwest Premium Frenzy’, *Variety*, 114:9, May 15, 1934, 25.

[vanity/bathroom set] giveaways on Monday and Tuesday, China on Thursday and statuettes for the kids on Saturday'.<sup>344</sup> These events were so effective because they not only filled movie-theatres on the slow week-nights, but ensured audiences had a reason to return each week for the duration of the premiums run.<sup>345</sup> Combining creativity and thriftiness, exhibitors ensured that they made the maximum profit from the lowest overhead costs, whilst also effectively filling auditoriums on notoriously slow nights.

Targeted at the demographic which composed 55-60 percent of Depression era audiences, women and teenage girls, Dish Night was the most popular variation.<sup>346</sup> It was on these nights that attendance increased significantly, reportedly by as much as 20-25 percent.<sup>347</sup> Dish sets typically had anywhere from 34 to 104 pieces so, for as many months as it took for patrons to complete the collection, exhibitors were guaranteed large audiences.<sup>348</sup> For many independent movie-theatres during the early 1930s, it was premium giveaways, rather than the films they showed, that became the primary incentive to visit the local movie-theatre. Independents in Chicago, for example, were accused by *Variety* of devoting too much advertising space to giveaways.<sup>349</sup> Given the popularity of these events across the country, it appears that a similar mindset had overcome audiences too.<sup>350</sup> The policies of individual exhibitors allude to this. Edward Sellette, the manager of the Pastime Theatre, for instance, announced that 'for the convenience of ladies unable to attend the evening performance, they can secure their articles at the above matinees by purchasing a 15c ticket'.<sup>351</sup> That there was a need for this rule indicates that, for female patrons at least, it was the dishes that became their

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<sup>344</sup> Epes W. Sargent, 'Buy Anyway', *Variety*, 109:13, March 7, 1933, 17.

<sup>345</sup> Anon., 'Lucky Numbers', *Exhibitors' Forum*, 7:10, July 7, 1931, 5.

<sup>346</sup> Fuller-Seeley, 'Dish Night', 252.

<sup>347</sup> Kusell, 'Bank Night', 190.

<sup>348</sup> Progressive Premium Co., "'Newport' Tableware Advertisement', *Boxoffice*, 31:20, October 9, 1937, 17.

<sup>349</sup> Anon., '225 of 350 Chi Giveaways', *Variety*, 118:6, April 24, 1935, 9.

<sup>350</sup> Klenotic, "Four Hours' of Hootin' and Hollerin", 149.

<sup>351</sup> Epes W. Sargent, 'Buy Anyway', *Variety*, 109:13, March 7, 1933, 17.

primary motivation for attending the movie-theatre. Kathryn Fuller-Seeley has written extensively on Dish Nights, and reasons that these events were successful because they filled an important function within Depression-era society: comforting downtrodden middle- and working-class housewives who did not have the means to buy new homewares.<sup>352</sup>

### **iii. Bank Night**

In May 1935, *Variety* reported that ‘replacing the giveaways at the box-office at present is bank nite and screeno’, events that would surpass the popularity of those that came before them.<sup>353</sup> Adopting a similar model to Dish Night, the one major difference was that Bank Night offered a prize which had a sustained and universal appeal: money. Dish Nights had filled movie-theatres on slow weeknights but only appealed to women and, as *Variety* drolly commented in 1935, ‘housewives are up to their gills in chinaware and couldn’t use another plate.’<sup>354</sup> Money, in contrast, was a hard commodity to come by during the 1930s, and weekly Bank Night proved considerably more popular than any other premium night. First introduced in 1933, variations of this event proved most popular between 1935 and 1940. It is estimated that 6,000 of America’s 15,000 movie-theatres were using some variation of Bank Night by 1937.<sup>355</sup> It is, therefore, outside of the time parameters of this section but is discussed here nevertheless because Bank Night was one of these short-term emergency measures used by exhibitors, at all levels and locations, to survive the continued impact of the Great Depression.

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<sup>352</sup> Fuller-Seeley, ‘Dish Night’, 253-254.

<sup>353</sup> Anon., ‘Ready Chi Giveaway Death-Knell As 193 of Needed 223 Votes Roll In’, *Variety*, 118:10, May 22, 1935, 31.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid.

<sup>355</sup> Paige Reynolds, ‘“Something for Nothing”: Bank Night and the Refashioning of the American Dream’, in Fuller-Seeley, ed., *Hollywood in the Neighbourhood*, 209.

Every week, movie-theatres offered prizes of between \$25 and \$1,000, a huge sum of money in communities where many were struggling to survive.<sup>356</sup> The weekly possibility of winning the jackpot created a buzz around movie theatres, and it was not uncommon for audiences to be so large that they could not all fit inside the theatre. It was not always a positive experience, however. It was not uncommon, for instance, for fights or riots to break out because, as Fuller-Seeley has remarked ‘Bank Night allowed for only one lucky winner and many empty-handed losers.’<sup>357</sup> Just as with Dish Night, the film on show ceased to matter, as people paid admission solely to have the chance to win the money, not watch the film. Unlike Dish Nights, however, Bank Night was not just a small-town phenomenon but an event that had urban appeal too. In December 1935, *Variety* reported that in the space of a few weeks New York’s movie theatres had been overtaken by Bank Night events, and had been adopted both by independents and also many of the studio-owned exhibition chains including RKO, Publix, and Loews.<sup>358</sup> This is significant because it demonstrates that, despite Hollywood’s dislike of this practice, several studio-owned exhibition chains felt that they had to run giveaways in order to compete with their neighbouring independents.<sup>359</sup>

While it would linger on in the years after 1935, by the end of the decade this type of event was beginning to fade from use – as were premium giveaways, price-cutting and double features. Dish nights oversaturated the market, and Bank Night was controversial for skirting and breaking local anti-lottery laws. Neither offered a viable long-term solution.<sup>360</sup> The need for them also declined as the severity of the Great Depression very gradually lessened in the latter half of the decade. Exhibitors experienced surges in attendance in the

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<sup>356</sup> Kusell, ‘Bank Night’, 190.

<sup>357</sup> Fuller-Seeley, ‘Dish Night’, 263.

<sup>358</sup> Anon., ‘Money Giveaways by Loew, RKO in N.Y.’, *Variety*, 120:12, December 4, 1935, 23; Anon., ‘“SCREENO” Makes Big Hit With Audiences’, *Publix Opinion*, 5:11, May 20, 1932, 5.

<sup>359</sup> Kusell, ‘Bank Night’, 190-191.

<sup>360</sup> Anon., ‘N. Y.’s Giveaway Test Case’, *Variety*, 121:12, March 4, 1936, 5; Reynolds, ‘“Something for Nothing”’, 216-218.

years following 1936, when an estimated 88 million were attending the movie-theatre regularly, a drastic improvement from earlier years.<sup>361</sup> This position would be further strengthened in the years between 1941 and 1945, a ‘golden age’ in film exhibition which saw Americans rekindle their relationship with Hollywood.

All the non-filmic practices discussed here grew from the economic desperation of the early 1930s. Largely used by independents, and later adopted by the studio-owned exhibition chains, these were in every way emergency, short-term solutions. Film had ceased to be enough of a draw, so exhibitors were forced to turn their attentions to making their movie-theatres as appealing as possible, and that meant offering more for a lot less. While all were, in some way, controversial and opposed by the wider film industry, these Depression era non-filmic practices provided a much-needed quick fix during the very worst years of the economic downturn. An economic necessity, these practices also led to an important realisation on the part of many exhibitors: that the movie-going experience extended further than the films shown. Movie-theatres needed to appeal to the communities to which they belonged, and during the early 1930s that meant catering to the public’s material needs. As the pressures of the Great Depression began to lessen, the emphasis was less upon offering dishes and money, and more upon radically transforming the movie-theatre (and movie-going experience, more generally).

Conspicuously absent from discussion of Depression era emergency measures is mention of the concession stand. While still in its infancy, the concession stand (in the initial form of candy vending machines) predated the onset of the economic crash in the vast majority of the nation’s movie-theatres. In 1936, candy sales brought in approximately 10 million dollars to American movie-theatres, in contrast to the one billion dollars taken at the

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<sup>361</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 195.

box office.<sup>362</sup> The Great Depression did not cause the emergence of the concession stand but, as the following section suggests, it may have had an influence (indirectly or otherwise) upon the shape that the concession stand took in the late 1930s.

As the pressures of the economic depression lessened, exhibitors re-evaluated the state of film exhibition: specifically, what the movie-theatre should be. Whilst picture palaces were in the minority, it was clear that extravagant and cavernous movie-theatres were not the future of film exhibition. Instead, movie-theatres of whatever size needed to be focused around patrons' needs. What ensued in the years following 1936 was a complete reimagining of the American movie-theatre, characterised by an extensive period of remodelling and refurbishment, as well as an added emphasis on non-filmic elements – of which the concession stand was a critical feature.

### **Part III: Comfort, Convenience, and Functionality, 1936-1939**

#### **'House Appeal': Better Conditions, New Motivations<sup>363</sup>**

While the quick fixes of the early Depression years lingered on for the remainder of the 1930s, during the second half of the decade they were no longer critical for movie-theatre survival. This is because, by 1936, the American economy, and in turn the film industry, were making slow steps towards recovery.<sup>364</sup> The New Deal policies introduced by Franklin D. Roosevelt following his inauguration as President in March 1933, made significant headway in rebuilding and stabilising the collapsed American economy. Key components of the New Deal targeted the American banking system, rejuvenated industries, and funded a series of

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<sup>362</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 78.

<sup>363</sup> J. Harry Toler, 'Motives and Methods', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 28:23, May 2, 1936, 33.

<sup>364</sup> Leonard Weisberg, 'Boxoffice Inquiring Reporter Goes Probing for Publix Pulse', *Boxoffice*, 28:5, December 28, 1935, 24-25.

public building work programmes.<sup>365</sup> The Great Depression was by no means over – that would not come until 1941 and the war – but conditions were gradually improving. ‘By the summer of 1936’, Smith argues ‘the Great Depression had not been cured – but there was enough evidence to support FDR’s case that the New Deal had made positive strides against the economic disaster.’<sup>366</sup> No longer faced with a desperate struggle to survive, exhibitors had the opportunity to reassess their approach in order to renew the public’s interest in the local movie-theatre. More measured and sustainable in the long term, the developments which emerged in the years following 1936 would irrevocably change the shape of American film exhibition.

*Boxoffice* regularly commented on the state of the American film exhibition at this time, providing vital insight into the gradual improvement of conditions. In March 1935, for example, the publication reported that attendance and box office receipts in the first quarter of the year were up ten percent from those of the same period in 1934.<sup>367</sup> Another sign that film exhibition was beginning to recover was that, by late 1935, ticket price raises were beginning to be considered and implemented nationally. Ben Shlyen, *Boxoffice*’s Editor-in-Chief, commented that:

In various parts of the country price raise ‘tests’ are being made, and undoubtedly, they will be watched with interest. With business conditions generally on the upswing and with early fall season reports in various trades indicating a continuance of good business, it would seem that now is the logical time for a restoration of sound admission prices, where they have been dropped too low.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> Smith, *A Concise History of the New Deal*, 41,45, 48-49.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>367</sup> Anon., ‘Sees Increased Gross’, *Boxoffice*, 26:14, March 2, 1935, 10.

<sup>368</sup> Ben Shlyen, ‘Again the Price Question’, *Boxoffice*, 27:15, September 7, 1935, 4.

Jack Cohn, the Vice-President of Columbia Pictures, echoed this sentiment in August 1936, when he implored the industry to recognise the upturn in the economy. He believed that a ticket price increase of 5-10 percent was necessary, and that it was a development that the studio-owned exhibition chains needed to lead: Cohn commented that, ‘since the circuits dominate the exhibition map, it is up to them to take the initiative, and that the independent houses could be expected to follow.’<sup>369</sup> In the following months, exhibitors at all levels took Cohn’s advice and began raising prices.<sup>370</sup> Yet despite such positive developments, it is important to remember that recovery was not instantaneous but rather a gradual process, something that *Boxoffice* was keen to reinforce. In August 1935, for example, the publication commented that while business was slowly getting better, it was still down 25 percent from 1929.<sup>371</sup> Baby steps towards recovery were being taken, but the film industry was still a long way from the highs of the pre-Depression years.

With an estimated 88 million visiting the movie-theatres weekly in 1936, attendance was beginning to pick up, as were profits.<sup>372</sup> To stand any hopes of sustaining this upturn in business, exhibitors needed extensively to overhaul their often-tired movie-theatres. No longer fighting for survival, this realisation kickstarted a wave of modernisation and remodelling which consumed American film exhibition for the remainder of the decade. *Boxoffice*, consistently a guiding light in providing advice and illuminating the newest trends and innovations, was a vocal advocate for this movement. In the years following 1935, modernisation was regularly the dominant theme for the publication’s monthly specialised supplement: *The Modern Theatre*. In May 1936, J. Harry Toler, the editor of this supplement, explicitly outlined its intended purpose:

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<sup>369</sup> Anon., ‘Cohn for a Price Boost’, *Boxoffice*, 29:12, August 15, 1936, 4.

<sup>370</sup> Anon., ‘Price Hike Moves Growing in Circuit Favour’, *Boxoffice*, 29:14, August 29, 1936, 7; Anon., ‘Price Hikes Win Favour’, *Boxoffice*, 29:16, September 12, 1936, 4.

<sup>371</sup> Ben Shlyen, ‘Let’s Go, Show Business!’, *Boxoffice*, 27:12, August 17, 1935, 3.

<sup>372</sup> Anon., ‘Barometer of Business’, *Boxoffice*, 29:14, August 29, 1936, 7; Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 195.

The MODERN THEATRE section of BOXOFFICE has for its principal objective the very definite purpose of inspiring greater interest in property improvement ... We subscribe fully to the doctrine of showmanship that plays the thing – BUT most devoutly, we espouse the principal of House Appeal the environment of entertainment – is the foundation upon which the industry will build its future prosperity.<sup>373</sup>

In line with this ethos, each issue focused upon a different topic, for example, air conditioning or lighting, offering articles, advertisements, and opinion pieces on all manner of issues relating to film exhibition practices.

There are a large volume of articles encouraging renovation from this period, many often chiding hesitant exhibitors.<sup>374</sup> With renovation an expensive activity, it is only natural that exhibitors were hesitant to fully commit, particularly when the spectre of the Great Depression still lingered. Offering firm yet tough love, *The Modern Theatre* was passionate in its belief that, despite its costs, this was an important and necessary step for exhibitors at all levels and locations. In February 1936, Toler delivered a blistering critique of the bias within the film industry in favouring the larger studio-owned movie-theatres:

We are tired of hearing the small-theatre group misjudged and minimized ... The credulity of certain uninformed manufacturers who maintain that a mode for modernization exists only among owners of metropolitan theatres is amazing ... Who is modernizing now? Certainly it isn't all being done by the big shots with the Broadway complexes. It is, in fact, the Main Street crowd that is putting its money and faith into property modernization ... There are in operation more than 10,000 theatres with seating capacities of less than a

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<sup>373</sup> J. Harry Toler, 'Motives and Methods', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 28:23, May 2, 1936, 33.

<sup>374</sup> J. Harry Toler, 'Progressive remodeling', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 27:13, August 24, 1935, 15.

thousand. Approximately 8,000 of these houses are located in towns of 10,000 population and under.<sup>375</sup>

Modernisation and related renovation works were not confined to the first run and deluxe houses, as Toler makes very clear. But instead, were being undertaken by many of the country's smaller independent houses. Their willingness to adapt provided yet another example of independent exhibitors' desire to alter their businesses in line with customer and economic needs. As previously noted, remodelling was an expensive undertaking, and *The Modern Theatre* offered ways to manage the process and costs, emphasising for example the need for meticulous planning. It also pointed exhibitors to a source of financial aid that had the ability to make renovation possible for exhibitors at all levels.

It was not just *Boxoffice* encouraging exhibitors to modernise, but the American government too. As the country slowly began to recover from the Great Depression, as part of the New Deal the U.S. government supported efforts to spruce up public buildings in the hopes of boosting public morale and generating business. Movie-theatres were one such type of building to receive help. This support came in the form of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) Modernisation Credit Plan. Rather than providing funding outright, the FHA set up measures and regulations which made it much easier for exhibitors to borrow money to fund their renovations projects. A firm supporter of the programme, *The Modern Theatre* regularly encouraged exhibitors to apply and take full advantage of this government support.<sup>376</sup> *The Modern Theatre* is, therefore, an invaluable source of information and provides a succinct explanation of what exactly this programme was:

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<sup>375</sup> J. Harry Toler, 'In Defence of a Most Deserving Group', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 28:11, February 8, 1936, 23.

<sup>376</sup> Anon., 'Only Permanent Structural Improvements Qualify for F. H. A. Loans', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 32:23, April 30, 1938, 74-75.

The Administration itself makes no loans, but insures private financial institutions [are protected] against loss on loans made for modernization and repair of theatre property, including the purchase and installation of certain types of equipment and machinery. Loans up to a \$50,000 maximum may be obtained on each property.<sup>377</sup>

With the government's support, the Modernisation Credit Plan ensured that banks and private finance companies were much more willing to lend funds to exhibitors, at lower interest rates and with a longer period of repayment (exhibitors had five years to repay) as the government underwrote the loan.<sup>378</sup> This funding could be used for building repairs and maintenance, but also to purchase new equipment (for example, projectors, air conditioning, or candy counters).<sup>379</sup> When first introduced in 1936 exhibitors could apply for up to \$50,000, but by 1938 this had fallen to \$10,000.<sup>380</sup>

Modernisation and aesthetic overhaul were an important development within American movie-theatres in the years following 1935, and for many independents the FHA's programme was a crucial lifeline. Without this support, they would not have been able to have self-funded the extensive overhauls that the nation's movie-theatres needed. Initially introduced in 1934, by August 1936 approximately 1,300 movie-theatres had applied for FHA funds, and a total of \$2,500,000 had been borrowed under the scheme.<sup>381</sup> This figure was not compiled entirely from movie-theatres alone, but also included amusement centres, so the accuracy is questionable. A more accurate report comes from December 1936:

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<sup>377</sup> Robert B. Smith, 'Renovation Brings a Prompt Reward', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 28:7, January 11, 1936, 32.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid.; Anon., 'Preliminary Steps Toward Securing a Modernizing Loan', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 32:19, April 2, 1938, 60-61.

<sup>379</sup> Robert B. Smith, 'Air Conditioning Under the F. H. A. Plan', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 28:11, February 8, 1936, 26.

<sup>380</sup> Norman J. Radder, 'F.H.A. Loans and Theatre Restroom Modernization', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 32:15, March 5, 1938, 60.

<sup>381</sup> Anon., 'Total of \$2,500,000 Borrowed From FHA', *Boxoffice*, 29:13, August 22, 1936, 8.

‘Theatres rehabilitated through the modernization credit plan of the federal housing administration during 1936 numbered 928 with notes insured for \$2,189,634.’<sup>382</sup> This figure might seem fairly low in comparison to the total number of movie-theatres operating at this time – approximately 17,000.<sup>383</sup> Given the demand for this programme in the following years, this earlier lull seems to have been a product of exhibitors being unaware or not fully understanding the FHA program in 1936. This is demonstrated by the extension of this policy.

Initially introduced in August 1934 and originally set to run until October 1936, increased demand for the programme meant that it was extended several times, ultimately ending in 1938.<sup>384</sup> In its final months during 1938, *The Modern Theatre* ran several articles fully outlining the Modernisation Credit Plan: its intended purpose, application procedure, and eligibility criteria.<sup>385</sup> Its reasoning for doing this was that the publication had received an increase in letters from exhibitors enquiring about the plan, and how to apply. There are no figures or details available from this later period to outline just how many movie-theatres took advantage of the FHA’s support, but it is nonetheless clear that this was a necessary lifeline for many exhibitors (particularly independents) who wished to modernise.

As America began slowly to recover, the picture palace model that had dominated the preceding decade came under increasing criticism. Reflecting in 1935 on film exhibition in the 1920s, Shlyen remarked that: ‘Good thing to see the reckless abandon of other days giving way to sanity in new construction. Four and five-thousand seaters aren’t heard of anymore ... More intimate, these smaller places. Less expensive to operate. Greater

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<sup>382</sup> Anon., ‘Federal Housing Funds To Many’, *Boxoffice*, 30:5, December 26, 1936, 7.

<sup>383</sup> Solomon, *Twentieth Century-Fox*, 18.

<sup>384</sup> Anon., ‘Federal Housing Funds To Many’, *Boxoffice*, 30:5, December 26, 1936, 7; Anon., ‘Total of \$2,500,000 Borrowed From FHA’, *Boxoffice*, 29:13, August 22, 1936, 8.

<sup>385</sup> Anon., ‘Preliminary Steps Toward Securing a Modernizing Loan’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 32:19, April 2, 1938, 60-61.

assurance of success.’<sup>386</sup> The Great Depression was a much-needed reality check, one which highlighted the flaws of this model, and emphasised the need for a recalibration of American film exhibition.<sup>387</sup> Exhibitors recognised the need to tap into what their audiences wanted: comfort, functionality, modernity, and convenience.<sup>388</sup> It was these qualities, under the umbrella term ‘House Appeal’, that came to dictate American film exhibition in the following decades.

Influencing much of the modernisation taking place, House Appeal consumed the pages of *The Modern Theatre* during the late 1930s. No longer were movie-theatres spaces that were intended to awe audiences, but instead they were a service that needed to appeal to movie-goers’ every need and comfort. The lavish trappings of the old picture palace exhibition model were stripped away, as Gomery has described:

... a limited stage show was not the only way the movie palace formula of the 1920s was transformed. The fundamental style of the building took on a new look, reflecting the changes that were taking place in the world of architectural design ... During the 1930s, however, Eberson sought a less expensive style ... His all-too-rare commissions of the 1930s wasted no space and were efficient in cost, construction, and operation.<sup>389</sup>

Efficiency and modernity were key to movie-theatres of the late 1930s, as Gomery observes. Everything was stripped back. Gone were the intricate gold-gilded interiors and expensive furnishings, replaced by cheaper, more modern equivalents. Detailed frescoes of Roman

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<sup>386</sup> Ben Shlyen, ‘Transient Thoughts’, *Boxoffice*, 28:2, December 7, 1935, 3.

<sup>387</sup> Helen Kent, ‘Follies of the Past and Today’s Functions’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 29:13, August 22, 1936, 34.

<sup>388</sup> J. Harry Toler, ‘The Maintenance Side of Smart Management’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 28:23, May 2, 1936, 23; J. Harry Toler, ‘A Distorted View of What the Public Wants’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 31:9, July 24, 1937, 31.

<sup>389</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 73-74.

villas and starlit skies were deemed old-fashioned, and instead more neutral colour palettes were adopted.<sup>390</sup>

The new focus placed upon House Appeal by exhibitors and *The Modern Theatre* from 1935 not only impacted interior design. It also placed a renewed importance on non-filmic exhibition practices which were designed to improve the movie-going experience. It is in this significant revision in motivation, in large part a product of exhibitors' experience during the hard years of the early 1930s, that the Great Depression can be seen to have influenced the shape of the concession stand. The severe economic hardship that exhibitors had all experienced during that period forced them to rethink the film exhibition model. The desperate struggle to survive placed greater emphasis on how all aspects of the movie-theatre, not just the films on show, were monetisable. As the following section will discuss, one such component here was the concession stand, which underwent a major development in the years following 1935.

### **'We Are Experimenting No Longer': From Vending Machine to Candy Counter<sup>391</sup>**

The period of extensive modernisation and renovation did not simply end at sprucing up the movie-theatre space. That was an important component of this period, but so too were developments made in relation to several key non-filmic services. All were intended to contribute to making the movie-going experience as comfortable and pleasant for audiences as possible. There were three key areas in which developments were made: air conditioning, seating and, most relevant for this thesis, the concession stand. As previously discussed,

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<sup>390</sup> John Eberson, 'Naborhood and Small-Town Cinemas of Tomorrow', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 26:23, May 4, 1935, 26; Anon., 'Gorgeous is the Word for Grand Island's Grand', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 31:13, August 21, 1937, 46-47.

<sup>391</sup> Max Schosberg, 'Increase Candy Machine Revenue, Asks Schosberg', *Publix Opinion*, 4:20, September 25, 1931, 2.

vending machines dispensing chewing gum and candy had been a fixture of many independent movie-theatres throughout the 1920s and had entered the major studio-owned exhibition chains in the months preceding the 1929 stock market crash. By 1935, therefore, candy vending machines had become a common fixture of many of the nation's movie-theatres. This concession model underwent significant changes during the post-1935 modernisation period, prompted not only by exhibitors' re-evaluation of space within the movie-theatre but also the growing economic importance of the concession stand.

Typically located in alcoves or the corners of movie-theatre lobbies, by the early 1930s vending machines had a fairly unobtrusive presence. They were available for those movie-goers that wanted to use them, but exhibitors did not devote a lot of attention to advertising their location or promoting their goods. Despite this, vending machines became a stable source of profit. In March 1931, *Publix* reported that several of their movie-theatres were averaging one sale to every three movie-goers.<sup>392</sup> A relatively high success rate, this demonstrates that even without exhibitors pushing confectionaries, vending machines were turning a decent profit. This became particularly important during the early years of the Great Depression, because as Valentine remarks: 'Candy sales kept many theatre owners in the black during the Depression, returning a profit of 45 percent on gross sales.'<sup>393</sup> While individual sales may only have accounted for a few cents, exhibitors were finding that vending machines collectively were raking in substantial profits, with very little effort required on their own part.

A lifeline during the worst of the Depression years, by 1935 concession sales were a vital source of profit for nearly all of America's movie-theatres. Vending machines were becoming the movie-theatre's second box office, hidden away in the dark recesses of the

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<sup>392</sup> Max Schosberg, 'Merchandising Head Askes Cooperation of Managers', *Publix Opinion*, 4:4, March 20, 1931, 9.

<sup>393</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 172.

lobby. During this modernisation period, exhibitors began critically to re-examine and reconfigure the space within the movie-theatre, specifically the lobby itself.

The picture palaces had incorporated numerous lobbies, foyers, and waiting rooms, designed to help accommodate the thousands who visited them daily. By the mid-1930s, there was a realisation that this was wasted space. An important component of many modernisation overhauls, therefore, was the complete redesign of the lobby space and its purpose. Movie-goers had to pass through the lobby on their transit from the street into the auditorium.<sup>394</sup> Exhibitors realised that this was not just a waiting room, but instead a space that could be capitalised upon through merchandising. This insight became increasingly pertinent by the mid-1930s, as exhibitors began to consider more seriously how best to fully exploit concession sales. The most significant development which occurred during this period, in relation to the concession stand, was the transition from candy vending machine to a manned candy counter. Rather than being dispensed from small automatic machines, confections were increasingly sold from large wooden counters staffed by several attendants. This was a significant advance that itself resulted in several important developments, all of which dramatically transformed the concession model.

Not suited to being discreetly tucked out of the way, the new counter model occupied a more prominent position within the movie-theatre lobby than the vending machine had. It took prime position, relocated to the centre of the lobby space. Consequently, the concession stand was a lot more visible: movie-goers had to see it and walk around it in order to get to the auditorium. This is significant because concession sales are largely the product of impulse. By making it more visible, exhibitors maximised audience exposure to the confectionaries being sold, and in so doing could fully exploit and target movie-goers' impulse purchases. The candy counters' new location was central to this but so too were the

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<sup>394</sup> Anon., '(R)evolution', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 32:19, April 2, 1938, 43.

staff that operated it. While greater analysis would be devoted to this component of the concession stand during the following decades, it was a well-established belief that staff (particularly young, attractive female attendants) could help push greater sales.<sup>395</sup> Referred to as upselling today, it is a commonly acknowledged retail practice that face-to-face communication with a sales assistant can encourage customers to make additional purchases: why have one Hershey chocolate bar, when you could have two? As well as serving customers and maintaining the candy counters, attendants were also expected to persuade customers to buy more – a function that vending machines were not equipped to do.

A major flaw with vending machines was that they had been very limited in the confectionary items that they offered. Not refrigerated and with relatively small capacities, most throughout the 1920s tended to sell chewing gum and some candied goods, normally items with long shelf lives which would not easily spoil. Chocolate, a favourite of the American public, was often not offered due to the lack of refrigeration and its propensity to melt in heat. The validity of this concern is highlighted by a memo published in an issue of *The Film Daily* from September 1933, which reminded exhibitors that with the onset of cooler weather they could now offer chocolate items.<sup>396</sup>

Two key features of the candy counter enabled those who manned it to offer more choice. The first was refrigeration. The traditional ice box was gradually being replaced, from the mid-1920s, by a newer appliance in some American households, particularly of the middle class: the refrigerator.<sup>397</sup> This new technology meant that there was a way to keep food cold and, therefore, fresh for longer. By the early 1930s, candy counter manufacturers were incorporating refrigeration technology into the counters they sold. Aided by the

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<sup>395</sup> Anon., 'Candy Revenue Increased Three Times by Counters', *Publix Opinion*, 5:9, April 22, 1932, 9.

<sup>396</sup> Anon., 'Show-Man's Reminder', *The Film Daily*, 63:72, September 25, 1933, 2.

<sup>397</sup> Susanne Freidberg, *Fresh: A Perishable History* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 38-39; Jonathon Rees, *Refrigeration Nation: A History of Ice, Appliances, and Enterprise in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 140-142.

increased storage space that the candy counter offered, refrigeration meant that exhibitors were no longer constrained by the confectionary items that they could sell. Gone were the days of only offering two or three different items. These new counters meant that movie-goers had a larger variety of snacks to choose from. Publix initially began operating candy counters in a small number of its movie-theatres from 1932, and even during this experimental period, the exhibition chain offered between ‘25 to 40 different candy items, ranging in price from 5 to 50 cents’.<sup>398</sup> Centrally located, well-lit, and attractively displayed, the candy counter was much more appealing than the vending machine. The concession stand was no longer a passive presence within the dark recesses of the movie-theatre lobby, but instead actively promoted its presence and products. Every element and feature was specifically designed to captivate and encourage movie-goers to spend the most money possible.

The candy counter was not only a much more attractive and appealing model for customers, it also negated many of the key operating drawbacks of the vending machine – faults which had discouraged some exhibitors from engaging with confectionary sales.<sup>399</sup> As discussed in chapter one, whilst an effective source of supplementary income, candy vending machines were extremely vulnerable to crime in the form of robbery and slugs. Both had been problems that had plagued independents throughout the 1920s, and despite their greater strength, it quickly became apparent that the major studio-owned exhibition chains were not immune to these issues either.

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<sup>398</sup> Anon., ‘Candy Revenue Increased Three Times by Counters’, *Publix Opinion* 5:9, April 22, 1932, 9.

<sup>399</sup> Max Schosberg, ‘Merchandising Head Asks Cooperation of Managers’, *Publix Opinion*, 4:4, March 20, 1931, 9; Max Schosberg, ‘Increase Candy Machine Revenue, Asks Schosberg’, *Publix Opinion*, 4:20, September 25, 1931, 2.

In the years immediately following Publix's installation of candy vending machines, *Publix Opinion* was littered with memos reminding exhibitors about the need to empty vending machines overnight. One example from January 1931 read:

Cash boxes of candy vending machines have been forced in a number of our theatres after closing hours, with a loss to the theatres of fairly substantial amounts. Warning is issued by Max Schosberg, head of the department that all cash boxes must be emptied every night before closing and the funds placed in safe keeping.<sup>400</sup>

A target for robberies, especially during the dire years of the early 1930s, vending machines were the not the most secure way of storing money – as these reminders demonstrate. This was particularly important because, as another article in *Publix Opinion* sought to highlight, the vending machines used by Publix holdings were not insured so any losses were 'charged against individual operations'.<sup>401</sup> Other reports in *Publix Opinion* reveal that the exhibition chains' movie-theatres were also victim to slugs. In another memo, exhibitors were asked to send any slugs to Schosberg's office as the candy department was researching methods to 'curb this evil' that plagued candy vending machines.<sup>402</sup> These machines clearly had drawbacks, and as a result, not all exhibitors supported their use.

The traditional view of the concession stand (or lack thereof) during the 1920s, might suggest that exhibitors would reject confectionary because of its working-class associations. This thesis has already discussed the inaccuracies of this interpretation, but archival evidence further disproves it. Numerous articles in *Publix Opinion* allude to there being some Publix exhibitors who were reluctant to embrace confectionary sales. What is clear, however, is that

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<sup>400</sup> Anon., 'Warning', *Publix Opinion*, 3:58, October 17, 1930, 10.

<sup>401</sup> Anon., 'Care Urged To Stop Candy Thefts', *Publix Opinion*, 4:13, June 26, 1931, 6.

<sup>402</sup> Anon., 'Slugs!', *Publix Opinion*, 4:11, May 29, 1931, 9.

their hesitation was not related to the film industry's highbrow aspirations but rather a product of laziness. They simply did not want to deal with maintaining vending machines, especially given how vulnerable they were to theft. During the early 1930s, Schosberg issued several statements appealing, almost pleading, with exhibitors to look past the operational difficulties of vending machines to their profit-making potential. As *Publix Opinion* reported:

'The success of the vending machines in our theatres is directly proportionate to the interest shown by individual managers' ... according to Max Schosberg ... 'Our department is greatly disappointed ... with the results we are obtaining in some districts in our circuit ... Naturally, we do not think that the operation of candy machines in the theatre is of first importance, but we do feel that the machines, if they are worth retaining, should be considered a definite part of the theatre, and, as such, should be accorded the same care and consideration that any other function of operation is shown. Surely a manager isn't going to allow his aversion to any theatre policy [to] reflect itself at the box office ... Yet we have found that the many of the poor results obtained by the candy machines are directly attributable to the opposition and indifference that the manager feels against the machines.'<sup>403</sup>

In the first of such statements made by Schosberg, in May 1931, he attempted to chastise unco-operative exhibitors into submission. Making several claims about the lucrative business being done at holdings that were co-operating, Schosberg was placing full blame for any failings on individual exhibitors. Their disinterest in confectionary sales, he believed, was what was hindering business, and nothing else. While conceding that vending machines were not the first priority of the chain, he made it perfectly clear (as would Katz in his

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<sup>403</sup> Max Schosberg, 'Merchandising Head Asks Cooperation of Managers', *Publix Opinion*, 4:4, March 20, 1931, 9.

capacity as the President of Publix) that the chain's exhibitors were expected to take candy seriously.<sup>404</sup>

In a later, rather more desperate appeal, Schosberg's ire and criticism of exhibitors lessened. Writing in September 1931, he conceded that:

We appreciate the trouble managers experience at times with these machines ... We are constantly striving to correct these difficulties. As a matter of fact, we now have a new coin unit for the machine that will reject at least 95 per cent of all slugs as well as one that is more efficient. General distribution of these new machines begins within three months. The machines are in to stay. We are experimenting no longer.<sup>405</sup>

This article is significant for several reasons, the first being Schosberg's acknowledgement that candy vending machines were subject to limitations. As long as the candy department were trying to resolve these, their experimentation with anti-slug technology one example of this, some exhibitors were still reluctant to engage. His final statement that vending machines were now a permanent fixture of the chain, and that experimentation had finished, was evidently an attempt at taking a firmer stance. Exhibitors needed to accept machines because they were not going anywhere. Except, in fact, that they were: in the following months, the chain began experimenting with a more reliable concession model: the candy counter.

Vending machines were still used by many of Publix's holdings, but by early 1932 they began the process of trialling and installing manned counters. Discussing this transition in April 1932, *Publix Opinion* reported that:

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<sup>404</sup> Anon., 'Support of Lobby Merchandising Plan Asked', *Publix Opinion*, 3:24, February 28, 1930, 3.

<sup>405</sup> Max Schosberg, 'Increase Candy Machine Revenue, Asks Schosberg', *Publix Opinion*, 4:20, September 25, 1931, 2.

Nine more theatres are soon to be equipped with candy counters such as are now successfully being operated in 38 theatres throughout the country, it was announced by the Candy Sales Department. These theatres are: the Brooklyn Paramount, the Dallas Palace and Melba, the Fort Worth Worth, the San Antonio Texas and Aztec, the Houston Metropolitan and Kirby, and the New Orleans Saenger.<sup>406</sup>

The location of these candy counters is significant. Not only were they confined to the larger, urban deluxe movie-theatres, but all but one of those listed here were located in the Southern territory. As previously discussed, the Southern states were the last to have vending machines installed in Publix movie-theatres. As part of the exhibition chain's vending machine expansion into the area, the Candy Department decided to also incorporate candy counters as part of this process. While only in a very small number of its holdings by 1932, candy counters were yielding impressive results: 'It has been our experience' Schosberg was quoted as saying 'during the past two years, that candy counters bring in from two to three times the volume of sales brought in by vending machines.'<sup>407</sup> Safer, more attractive and, most importantly, offering better returns, the candy counter was a concession model which proved a hit with the public and exhibitors alike.

Publix began this process in 1932 in a small number of its movie-theatres, but the transition to this new concession model would not become widespread, in both independent and studio-owned exhibition chains, until the years following 1935. RKO, for example, would install its first candy counter in August 1936, and by 1938 was operating both candy counters and vending machines within its holdings.<sup>408</sup> Operating both methods became standard in most movie-theatres during this period, the candy counter not replacing the

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<sup>406</sup> Anon., 'Candy Revenue Increased Three Times by Counters', *Publix Opinion*, 5:9, April 22, 1932, 9.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

<sup>408</sup> Anon., 'See Slight Chance of Ill. Statute to End Theater Sale of Merchandise', *The Film Daily*, 74:12, July 15, 1938, 1.

vending machine but rather supplementing it. B&K, for example, began from 1938 to operate a ‘candy bar stand in the Chicago Theater’s main lobby, while in the restrooms there are Coca Cola and candy bar vending machines’.<sup>409</sup> The candy counter would become the primary confectionary model, but vending machines were still used by many exhibitors, typically tucked in corners of lobbies or restrooms, to exploit any additional sales.

It was in the years following 1935 that small case studies featuring the candy counter began to emerge in *The Modern Theatre*. These examples were used by the publication to highlight that this was one important development that exhibitors could take to modernise their operation. One of the earliest articles was a 2-page case study on the renovation of the New Granada Theatre in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, from 1937. This movie-theatre was completely redesigned in line with the new conception of House Appeal that emerged at this time: ‘... another ugly duckling landmark has been transformed into a marvel of beauty and mechanical efficiency ... Every department of the New Granada exemplifies elegance, efficiency and due regard for the comfort and convenience of its patrons’.<sup>410</sup> In order to achieve this, all aspects of the movie-theatre underwent significant change, from the interior design and lighting to air conditioning and seating. The concession stand was no different, and as part of the renovation a ‘confectionary bar’ was installed within the movie-theatre.<sup>411</sup> The article provides very little detail relating to the concession stand beyond that. This was not unusual for this time period, and in later case studies the concession stand still only garners a fleeting mention. In the magazine’s 1938 coverage of the reopening of the Liberty Theatre in Springfield, Ohio, for instance, a candy counter is listed among the new

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<sup>409</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>410</sup> Anon., ‘Case History No. 6: The Miraculous Result of an Old Building’s Renovation’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 31:1, May 29, 1937, 48.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 49.

developments. It is described as ‘an integral part of the theatre’, presumably due to its profitability, but *The Modern Theatre* provides no further detail to explain this comment.<sup>412</sup>

Nevertheless, brief mentions in *The Modern Theatre*'s case studies provide tangible proof that candy counters were becoming a fixture of the new, modern American movie-theatre and further evidence of the transition to this new concession model is found in trade press discussion of the growing unionisation of movie-theatre staff in the late 1930s. This was a period in which staff in virtually all sections of the film industry – production, distribution, and exhibition – unionised, pressuring for better working conditions, job security, and pay. Movie-theatre ushers and attendants were one group that threatened to take action, and one of their primary objections was having to work on candy counters when needed.<sup>413</sup> They argued that manning the candy counter was not a part of their responsibility and they were not getting paid extra to compensate and, therefore, they should not be asked to do so. In the months following, this would snowball further. Not only were ushers unionising, but by June 1938 candy counter staff were too.<sup>414</sup> Allying with the disgruntled ushers, candy counter staff demanded better job security (which would alleviate the need for ushers to staff the candy counters) and pay – a minimum of \$14.50 a week.<sup>415</sup> If these demands were not met, front of house staff at many movie-theatres threatened to go on strike. Unionisation affected movie-theatres at all levels, both independents and the majors. Publix and Loew's, for example, both experienced trouble at this time.<sup>416</sup> The Paramount Theatre in New York City, was picketed for several days in July 1938 before negotiations could be reached.<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>412</sup> Helen Kent, ‘A Remarkable Case of Property Reclamation’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 34:3, December 10, 1938, 32.

<sup>413</sup> Anon., ‘Would Ban Ushers from Doubling As Candy Sellers; Theatre Unions’, *Variety*, 129:5, January 12, 1938, 26; Anon., ‘AFL's Amus. Federation?’, *Variety*, 129:10, February 16, 1938, 29.

<sup>414</sup> Anon., ‘Union Move to Org. Candy Butchers’, *Variety*, 131:1, June 15, 1938, 10.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>416</sup> Anon., ‘N. Y. Theatres in the Middle Of Union Tiff Over Candy Sellers’, *Variety*, 131:5, July 13, 1938, 11.

<sup>417</sup> Anon., ‘Concession Men Call Off N. Y. Par Pickets’, *Variety*, 131:6, July 20, 1938, 17.

*Variety's* coverage of these events provides invaluable evidence, not only for the growing unionisation of the film industry, but also offers greater insight into candy counter operation at this time. Detailing how these counters were operated and staffed in several of the major studio-owned exhibition chains, these reports also offer more general insight into the movie-theatre candy business. Unlike *Boxoffice*, *Variety* rarely mentioned the concession stand during this period, so the small comments that were made are both unusual – and useful. For example, while discussing striking staff who were picketing, *Variety* commented indirectly on the motivation behind internalising candy sales: ‘... a highly profitable business ... Candy business in theatres has been developed largely as an accommodation affair. It eliminates patrons having to leave the theatre for purchases.’<sup>418</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Regarding the Great Depression as the catalyst for the concession stand is essentially a myth. The nation’s independent exhibitors had shown the potential that confectionary sales held throughout the 1920s, and from 1928 major studio-owned exhibition chains worked to make additional profits from their own internalisation of candy sales. Whilst not the cause of the initial emergence of the concession stand, however, the Great Depression and its aftermath did force exhibitors to rethink the American movie-theatre, and the way in which it functioned. The years of severe hardship exposed flaws in the previous exhibition model. The drastic decline in attendance during the Depression’s worst years, proved that the film industry was not infallible, and film alone did not guarantee a reliable source of income. Designed purely for survival, the numerous emergency measures introduced during the early 1930s were never intended to be long-term solutions. Their immediate purpose was to help

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<sup>418</sup> Anon., ‘Union Move to Org. Candy Butchers’, *Variety*, 131:1, June 15, 1938, 10.

exhibitors, particularly independents, weather the storm, but they inadvertently prompted an important realisation: that the movie-going experience extended past the films on show. As the American economy slowly recovered in the years after 1935, the Depression experience led exhibitors to rethink the exhibition model. This led to a greater emphasis on comfortability, convenience, and economy, while at the same time emphasising the importance of a variety of non-filmic exhibition practices, with the concession stand as a vital component here.

House appeal, the new mindset in the years after 1935, heavily influenced the shape of American film exhibition. Good comfortable seating could influence which movie-theatre someone might decide to go to, just as the availability of air-conditioning and an attractive, well-stocked candy counter also became determining factors in where people chose to watch films. Born from the period of extensive modernisation and renovation which characterised the second half of the decade, these non-filmic developments were critical components of America's 'new' movie-theatres. The ostentatious wealth and opulence of the picture palaces of the 1920s were driven by a purpose: they were designed to help establish the fledgling film industry as a respectable and highbrow art form. The events of the early 1930s, and the economic desperation that they caused, shattered this illusion. Film exhibition was a business, one that needed to make a profit in order to survive. An inevitable development that would have occurred naturally at some point, it could be argued that the Great Depression played a role in accelerating this process. By the late 1930s the concession stand, dubbed the "second box office" by several concessionaire companies, was becoming an important additional source of profit for the film exhibition industry.<sup>419</sup> As the next chapter argues, its importance became even more evident during World War II, when sugar

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<sup>419</sup> Herber Brothers, 'Star Popcorn Machine Advertisement', *Boxoffice*, 32:13, February 19, 1938, 94; Wil-Kin, 'Popcorn Supplies Advertisement', *Boxoffice*, 32:8, January 15, 1938, 83.

rationing threatened to disrupt this new source of income and exhibitors desperately sought a suitable replacement. Their eventual salvation, popcorn, ushered in a new phase in movie-theatre refreshments – one that would make the concession stand even more integral to the economics of the American film exhibition industry.

### **Chapter Three: The Age of the Popcorn Machine, 1940-1948**

Sold from vending machines but also increasingly from centralised manned candy counters, by the late 1930s candy had firmly secured its position within the foyers and lobbies of movie-theatres across America. A convenient service for movie-goers, the sale of refreshments provided an increasingly necessary source of additional income for exhibitors at all levels as the country slowly emerged from the Depression years. This position would be strengthened during World War II, as the concession stand continued to entrench itself within the economics of the film exhibition industry. The special conditions of this period, a result of America's involvement in the war, would, however, radically alter the character of this non-filmic exhibition practice. For much of cinema's early history, it had been sugary treats that had dominated. The war years changed this, helping one particular refreshment item firmly to establish its dominance over American movie-theatres. Popcorn was this item.

Divided into three parts, this chapter will consider the outside factors that brought about this change as well as developments occurring within the concession stand itself. The first section will discuss the rise and rapid fall of candy, the prior "king" of the concession stand, as a direct consequence of World War II. The second part of the chapter will focus on how the particular conditions of the war enabled popcorn to fill the void left by candy. This position was further strengthened in the years following 1946, in part as a consequence of the flourishing of the popcorn industry during the immediate post-war period, as the final part of the chapter will discuss. The gradual introduction of soda to the movie-theatre concession stand in the immediate post-war years will also be discussed. Ultimately, this chapter will explain how popcorn emerged from World War II as *the* American movie-time snack, a position it further cemented in the post-war years.

## Part I: Candy, The Rise and Fall, 1940-1948

### ‘The Difference Between Profit and Loss’: Candy’s Golden Years<sup>420</sup>

By the late 1930s, the sale of confectionary goods, namely candy and chewing gum, was no longer an inconsequential side-line. Instead, it had become big business within the American film exhibition industry. The Treasury Department estimated that the nation’s 15,000 movie-theatres had made an annual gross profit of \$12,500,000 from confectionary sales in 1938.<sup>421</sup> A large proportion of such profits reported by *Motion Picture Herald* came from America’s metropolitan areas, cities in which confectionary sales were thriving. At the end of the decade, there were numerous reports in trade press magazines that attested to this. In 1939, it was estimated that movie-theatres in Manhattan were consistently taking thousands of dollars at the concession stand each week; approximately \$10,000 at studio-affiliated houses and \$4,000 at independents.<sup>422</sup> By 1940, exhibitors in both New York City and Chicago respectively reported that candy sales (the combined profits from both vending machines and candy counters) had exceeded one million dollars that year, an achievement that was also expected to be matched in Boston during 1941.<sup>423</sup> Despite not recording such impressive profits, confectionary sales within movie-theatres outside from the metropolitan areas were also successful at this time, albeit on a smaller scale.

New York and Chicago were anomalies in the film exhibition industry. Both cities had an unusually high concentration of movie-theatres which helped to account for these

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<sup>420</sup> William F. Crouch, ‘20 Million Nickels from Concessions’, *Motion Picture Herald*, 138:8, February 24, 1940, 42.

<sup>421</sup> The *Motion Picture Herald* article did make the qualification that exhibitors did not take the entirety of this gross profit, only a portion of it (an estimated \$4 million). This is because, in 1938, many exhibitors were using concessionaires, and it was this group – supplying and operating concession stands as a third party – who received the largest cut of the concession profits. Anon., ‘Restraint Charged in \$10,000,000 Theatre Candy Vending Business’, *Motion Picture Herald*, 134:12, March 25, 1939, 53.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid.; Anon., ‘Candy Nets Chi. Sweet “Take”’, *The Film Daily*, 79:16, January 23, 1941, 1; Anon., ‘\$1,000,000 Hub Candy’ Take’, *The Film Daily*, 79:43, March 4, 1941, 1.

inflated profit figures. As previous noted, independent movie-theatres in small towns and rural areas are less represented in the historical record. There is, however, evidence that can be used to demonstrate how thriving concession stands also were in non-metropolitan areas. An article in *Motion Picture Herald*, for example, provides significant insight into the concession business in Indiana in July 1940.<sup>424</sup> It details the results of a questionnaire undertaken by the 110 members of the Affiliated Theatre Owners of Indiana (an organisation of independent exhibitors within the state), 70 percent of who operated some form of concession business. Candy and popcorn were the dominant items, with 54 operating candy counters and 48 using popcorn machines (3 also reported offering soft drinks).<sup>425</sup>

Direct reports of this type, on the conditions of particular states, are rare though other sources of evidence are available. Frequently featured throughout the period, reports of robberies are another source of information. As in earlier periods, it was not uncommon for movie-theatres, specifically the concession stand, to be targeted by criminals. The Circle Theatre in New Orleans, Louisiana, for example, fell victim to a violent holdup. During closing on Thursday 20 November 1941, two men stole that day's takings, a total of \$263.20. *Variety*, reporting on the incident, noted that \$213.20 of that came from the box office receipts with the remaining \$50 surrendered, at gun point, by Rita Carlson, 'the candy girl'.<sup>426</sup> This example provides a frame of reference for box-office takings versus concession sales, which is often elusive in the historical record: in the case of the Circle Theatre, on that Thursday, approximately 20 percent of its takings came from the concession stand. Other reports of robberies are typically not as detailed, in terms of profit breakdown, but are valuable nonetheless. This is because they reinforce the point that movie-theatres, including the concession stand, were prime targets for crime. On the 19 August 1940, for example, one

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<sup>424</sup> Anon., 'Questionnaire on Concessions', *Motion Picture Herald*, 140:4, July 27, 1940, 16.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

<sup>426</sup> Anon., '2 Theatre Stickups', *Variety*, 144:12, November 26, 1941, 20.

man held up the staff of the Majestic Theatre in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, at gun point.<sup>427</sup> Having closely studied the movie-theatre's day-to-day operations in advance, he plotted to steal the previous weekend's takings, a bounty totalling \$528.27.<sup>428</sup> Forcing the manager, Leo Schuessler, to open the safe, he then bound and gagged Schuessler, the janitor, and two vending machine maintenance men in a store room, so that he could make his getaway.<sup>429</sup> In regards to the concession stand, the presence of the two vending machine servicemen, Louis Smaniatti and Raymond Gonzales, suggests that, at the very least, the Majestic was operating candy vending machines. Garnering brief attention in trade press magazines, reports of this type provide a window through which to see, if only fleetingly, the day-to-day realities of small-town film exhibition.

A final indication of how profitable the concession stand had become outside of the metropolitan centres was the increased effort of several states, in the year preceding World War II, to impose higher taxation on movie-theatre concession stands and vending machines. While some states had previously charged exhibitors a fee for operating concession stands, not all did. This changed in early 1941, when many states saw the potential extra income to be had from taxing film exhibition's booming side-line. An article in *Motion Picture Herald* detailed 20 states, largely in the Midwest, South, and New England, which were proposing to impose various higher sales taxes on candy vending machines.<sup>430</sup> Officials in other states, Michigan for instance, were attempting to reclassify the movie-theatre concession stand as a grocery store so that it was subject to a much higher level of tax. In June 1943, *Variety* reported on this, describing how Michigan's State Attorney General had ruled that

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<sup>427</sup> Anon., 'Nab 3 Theatre Thugs, Recover \$300 of \$528', *Variety*, 139:12, August 28, 1940, 22.

<sup>428</sup> Anon., 'Hold-up Man Gets \$528 At Majestic Theatre', *The Sheboygan Press*, Sheboygan: Wisconsin, August 19, 1940, 1, 4, available from: <https://www.newspapers.com/image/239818905> [accessed March 7, 2021].

<sup>429</sup> Anon., 'Nab 3 Theatre Thugs, Recover \$300 of \$528', *Variety*, 139:12, August 28, 1940, 22.

<sup>430</sup> Anon., 'State Candy Machine Taxes', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 142:6, February 8, 1941, 30.

the candy counters most theatres operate come under the ruling of full-fledged stores and in the cases of circuits the 'chain store tax' applies. All candy counters have been paying the regular 3c per dollar sales tax but the new ruling lays a progressive tax against the circuits which have to count each counter as a 'separate store,' with the tax progressing according to the number that the chain operates.<sup>431</sup>

The major exhibition chains, including Paramount, Warner Bros., and RKO, had come under similar attack in 1939, when a chain store tax bill was proposed in the New York State legislature.<sup>432</sup> These measures were vocally opposed, disputed, and appealed by American exhibitors. Independent exhibitors in Iowa and Nebraska, for example, allied to oppose new state laws which would have seen candy vending machines taxed. The legislation was quickly dropped.<sup>433</sup>

The blatant targeting of movie-theatre concession stands, especially those of the major exhibition chains, for tax purposes increased between 1939 and 1943. This aspect of the movie-theatre was thriving during this period, not only in the cities but also in more rural areas, so naturally it would fall under greater scrutiny by state officials hoping to profit from it. In 1941, *Motion Picture Herald* alluded to the increasing importance of confectionary sales: 'Candy sales appear to be getting more attention than pictures in some of the theatres of the land'.<sup>434</sup> Undoubtedly a tongue-in-cheek remark, it does nevertheless help to support the argument that, regardless of location and movie-theatre size, candy vending machines and counters were generating substantial sales for the exhibitors operating them, be they small

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<sup>431</sup> Anon., '8 Year Tax Payments Faced by Mich. Theatres On Candy Concessh Rule', *Variety*, 151:2, June 23, 1943, 31.

<sup>432</sup> Anon., 'How the New N. Y. Chain Store Bill, If Passed, Would Affect Theatres', *Variety*, 133:10, February 15, 1939, 15; Anon., 'N. Y. C. Show Biz to Take Tax Rap', *Variety*, 134:11, May 24, 1939, 6.

<sup>433</sup> Anon., 'Iowa Indies Oppose Bill To End Sunday Blue Laws', *The Film Daily*, 79:46, March 7, 1941, 6; Anon., 'Iowa Candy Vending Machine License Proposal is Deleted', *The Film Daily*, 79:53, March 18, 1941, 8.

<sup>434</sup> Terry Ramsaye, 'Policy Note', *Motion Picture Herald*, 144:2, July 12, 1941, 7.

independents or part of a large exhibition chain. In some instances, it was the concession stand that kept a movie-theatre in business. Commenting in February 1940 on exhibition conditions in rural areas, *Motion Picture Herald* stated that the concession stand ‘meant the difference between profit and loss ... Many small town exhibitors report that candy and popcorn sales pay the rent.’<sup>435</sup>

Another indication of the growing profitability of such non-filmic sources of income was the increased interest that the film industry, notably film trade press magazines such as *Boxoffice* and *Motion Picture Herald*, began to pay the concession stand by 1940. In previous decades, the sale of refreshments by exhibitors typically garnered fleeting attention in industry trade publications, as discussed in previous chapters. The concession stand was often overshadowed (particularly during the 1930s) by developments in other non-filmic exhibition practices, notably air-conditioning and better seating. Close analysis of the advertisements included in *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre* demonstrate this. In 1937, for example, advertisements for air-conditioning dominated the publication. *The Modern Theatre* featured over a hundred advertisements for air-conditioning over that year, in contrast to just seven for the concession stand, as Figure 1 illustrates. By 1940/41, however, the concession stand was enjoying greater attention and analysis within the publication. One way in which this manifested itself was the fact that there was a steady increase in the proportion of advertising materials relating to the concession stand – for example, the promotion of popcorn machines, candy bars, and related supplies – at this time. Such a shift can be clearly seen in Figure 2, demonstrating that the number of advertisements for the concession stand in 1940 was almost equal to those for air-conditioning. By 1945, the situation had completely reversed, as Figure 3 depicts. When America emerged from the war, it was the concession stand, rather than

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<sup>435</sup> William F. Crouch, ‘20 Million Nickels from Concessions’, *Motion Picture Herald*, 138:8, February 24, 1940, 42.

Figure 1: The frequency of *Boxoffice* advertisements in 1937, air-conditioning versus concession stand.

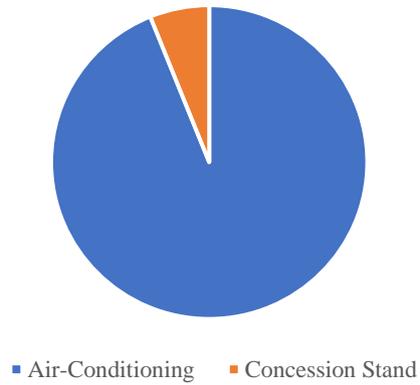


Figure 2: The frequency of *Boxoffice* advertisements in 1940, air-conditioning versus concession stand

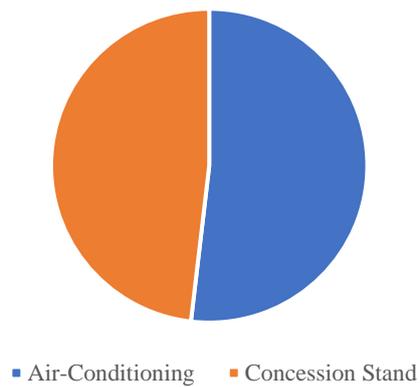
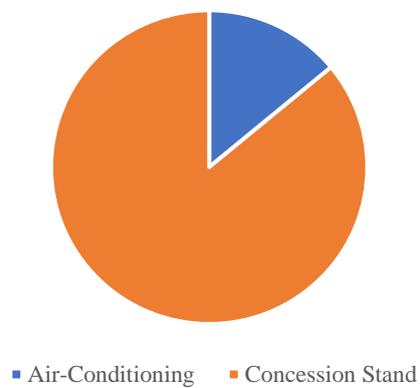


Figure 3: The frequency of *Boxoffice* advertisements in 1945, air-conditioning versus concession stand.



*Data compiled from analysis of all issues of Boxoffice from 1937, 1940, and 1945, respectively.*

air-conditioning, which dominated the advertising pages. The reasons underpinning this change will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

There was also a notable increase in the number of articles in *The Modern Theatre* commenting and advising exhibitors on aspects of concession-stand operation. During the same period, this type of advice similarly began to appear more frequently in another publication, *Motion Picture Herald*. Its own monthly supplement *Better Theatre* (which focused on matters of exhibition and was similar in many ways to *The Modern Theatre*), had by 1941 introduced a re-occurring feature segment called *The Vender-Vane*. This section of the magazine was dedicated to advertisements and articles analysing concession stand equipment and operational practices. While *The Vender-Vane* temporarily halted during the war years in response to the U.S. government's temporary ban on the production of concession stand-related products in the years between 1942 and 1945, it was restarted with renewed vigour in the post-war period. The growing attention paid to the concession stand by both publications at this time was, in part, a product of its growing popularity with audiences. More pragmatically, however, by the early 1940s many movie-theatres had installed air-conditioning and no longer needed persuading to do so.<sup>436</sup> The concession stand was now the new "in-thing", and it captured the attention of the trade press. By 1940, the majority of American movie-theatres operated some form of concession stand, and these publications were increasingly focused on showcasing ways in which they could be expanded, streamlined, and profits maximised.

After initial experimentation by Publix in 1932, from 1935 exhibitors began the transition from vending machines to candy counters. An important change, like other developments within cinema it was one that occurred gradually. Only 10 percent of movie-

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<sup>436</sup> Anon., '68% of Chi. Houses are Air Conditioned', *The Film Daily*, 77:63, March 29, 1940, 11.

theatres had counters installed by 1939.<sup>437</sup> This process continued into 1941 (after which, further installation was temporarily halted by World War II). In line with their increased interest in concession stand developments, *Boxoffice* and *Motion Picture Herald* paid considerable attention to this transition process. In February 1940, for example, *Motion Picture Herald* commented on the business being done by a candy concessionaire company, the Confection Cabinet Corporation, in the Chicago territory. Installing and operating a range of vending machines, candy counters, and a number of popcorn machines, the company operated the refreshment business in approximately 300 movie-theatres within the territory, making between \$10,000 to \$14,000 per week.<sup>438</sup> While some of their clients were independents, the article lists the major exhibition chains that the company was also servicing. These included affiliated holdings of RKO, Warner Brothers, and the Paramount-Publix Great States.<sup>439</sup> In January 1940, the Confection Cabinet Corporation also installed candy counters in several holdings of the Krim Brothers Circuit in Detroit, and in November 1941 counters were installed in the Comerford Circuit which had holdings throughout Pennsylvania.<sup>440</sup> These examples attracted a few sentences in *The Film Daily*. This was significantly more than most concession stand developments had garnered in previous decades, but these accounts still lacked much detail relating to the particulars of operation. It was regional branches of the larger studio-owned chains, like Fox Intermountain Theatres based in Denver (but with holdings in the surrounding states), that received much greater attention.

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<sup>437</sup> Anon., '10% Use Counters', *Motion Picture Herald*, 134:12, March 25, 1939, 53.

<sup>438</sup> William F. Crouch, '20 Million Nickels from Concessions', *Motion Picture Herald*, 138:8, February 24, 1940, 42.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid.

<sup>440</sup> Anon., 'Installs New Candy Depts.', *The Film Daily*, 77:4, January 5, 1940, 8; Anon., 'Three Get Candy Counters', *The Film Daily: Equipment News*, 80:101, November 21, 1941, 3.

In November 1940, several publications reported on the installation of candy counters (and additional vending machines) in thirty of the Fox Intermountain's holdings.<sup>441</sup> Alongside the installation of counters, Press Woods, an assistant manager at one of the movie-theatres, was sent to complete a month's long training programme in Los Angeles. Learning from staff at Fox West Coast, Fox Intermountain's sister chain, Woods was trained in all aspects of candy merchandising.<sup>442</sup> This knowledge and skills training was then shared by Woods with other managers and staff at Fox Intermountain Theatre. Fox West Coast had itself just completed the installation of counters throughout all of its holdings, a process which had created an immediate payoff. The exhibition chain reported that: 'one in every five persons buying admission will spend five cents for sweets. Expectancy is that for every admission ticket purchased, one cent will go for candy.'<sup>443</sup> (To give some context to this, according to data provided by Valentine, the average movie-theatre ticket cost 24 cents in 1940.<sup>444</sup>) Some of the chain's holdings, moreover, were exceeding these sales targets: the Fox Uptown in Los Angeles was making 2 cents at the concession stand for every admission bought.<sup>445</sup>

This period, the early 1940s, marked a decided shift in regards to the concession stand. It was now the major studio-owned and -affiliated exhibition chains who were actively engaging with developing this aspect of film exhibition, whereas in previous decades they had followed the lead of smaller independents. Fox West Coast, more than any other exhibition chain, played a significant role. Throughout the late 1930s and 1940s, this regional studio-owned exhibition chain (based in Los Angeles, but with holdings throughout the West Coast) was at the forefront of concession stand developments. These developments in major exhibition chains also prompted greater interest from publications like *Variety* and *The Film*

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<sup>441</sup> Anon., '30 Fox Intermountain Houses to Sell Candy', *The Film Daily*, 78:106, November 29, 1940, 9.

<sup>442</sup> Anon., 'Al Hoffman Back to Old Job', *Variety*, 140:13, December 4, 1940, 8.

<sup>443</sup> Anon., 'Side-line', *Motion Picture Herald*, 141:12, December 21, 1940, 9.

<sup>444</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 195.

<sup>445</sup> Anon., 'Side-line', *Motion Picture Herald*, 141:12, December 21, 1940, 9.

*Daily*, the former in particular having been largely ambivalent to this aspect of film exhibition in preceding years.

In line with their increased interest in the concession stand, film trade press magazines began to discuss ways in which refreshment sales could be maximised. A key example from this period was the emphasis placed on the use of intermissions. Itself not a new practice, what was significant about the re-emergence of the intermission in the 1940s was that it was not motivated by the practical needs of movie-goers but rather sales potential.

During the nickelodeon period, breaks within a programme were to be expected, providing time for the film reel to be changed. From the 1910s, however, this practice began to be phased out. As Jan Olsson has described it, by 1915, many movie-theatres were running two projectors consecutively, which meant that breaks were eliminated or kept to a minimum.<sup>446</sup> While intermissions remained in longer films, for example *Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915), by the end of the decade they were no longer standard practice, and in the 1920s were falling from use.<sup>447</sup> Not well-documented in the historical archive or scholarship, it is difficult to gather a full understanding of the history of the intermission.<sup>448</sup> The issue itself is further complicated because, as Olsson argues, there was no standard practice within America: factors such as location and movie-theatre type were, as always, important to consider.<sup>449</sup> From the research that Olsson has undertaken, what is clear is that intermissions had largely faded from use by the 1920s and were, therefore, not a standard feature of American film exhibition by the late 1930s. This would begin to change in late 1939, when

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<sup>446</sup> Jan Olsson, 'Exhibition Practices in Transition: Spectators, Audiences, and Projectors', in *Technology and Film Scholarship: Experience, Study, Theory*, ed. Santiago Hidalgo (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 53-57.

<sup>447</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>448</sup> This is an area of film exhibition that would benefit from further research. Close analysis of movie-theatre programmes from between 1915 and 1940 and trade press publications, like *Variety*, could improve scholarly understanding of the history of this practice. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, this level of analysis has not been possible in this thesis.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

they would see a surge in popularity with both audiences and exhibitors. The latter's interest related principally to their realisation that a three- or five-minute break within a film could boost the takings at their candy counters significantly.

One film in particular prompted this epiphany: *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939). With a running time of just under 4 hours, exhibitors quickly decided that this was too long to expect audiences to sit without a break or refreshments. Referred to as 'breathers' by Fanchon & Marco, a regional exhibition chain operating in St Louis, Missouri, the 15-minute intermission period provided movie-goers with dedicated time to 'stroll about the house, smoke in the lounge rooms, and, of course, visit the candy concessions.'<sup>450</sup> Coinciding broadly with this, 1941 also witnessed attempts by Hollywood and local authorities to target and eliminate double features, a Depression-era practice that lingered on. Bills were presented to introduce a 15-intermission period for any programme that ran longer than 2 hours 15 minutes in several state legislatures, with varying levels of success.<sup>451</sup> Particularly notable was the fact that the Illinois House of Representatives referenced how this 'great "health" measure' would also bolster the 'lobby industries', referring to refreshment sales.<sup>452</sup>

In spite of the pre-history of intermissions, it was as a direct consequence of screening *Gone with the Wind* that exhibitors realised the full sales potential of the intermission as an exhibition practice. Discussing the success being enjoyed by movie-theatres in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, *Variety* commented that:

When intermissions, inaugurated with 'Gone with the Wind,' opened up a new avenue of revenue with the selling of soft drinks, candies and chewing gum, local theatre operators at once seized upon the idea as applicable to

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<sup>450</sup> Anon., '5-Minute Breathers In F & M Theaters', *The Film Daily*, 80:11, July 16, 1941, 1.

<sup>451</sup> A bill of this nature was rejected by the Missouri Legislature in July 1941, but accepted by the Illinois House of Representatives in the same month. Anon., 'Goldwyn Sees End of Doubles Soon', *Motion Picture Herald*, 144:3, July 19, 1941, 69; Anon., 'Outside Looking In', *The Film Daily*, 80:3, July 3, 1941, 8.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid.

various houses showing double features, and intermissions have since become a regular thing ... 'You ought to see what it adds to the gross at the end of the week' said one of them [an exhibitor]. 'There's the answer in dollars and cents, and it's plenty.'<sup>453</sup>

As this comment demonstrates, intermissions proved highly effective in enabling exhibitors fully to exploit their audiences' time at the movie-theatre. They no longer had just the time before and after a film to tempt refreshment sales, but also now during the show itself too.

Intermissions proved so successful that, by early 1947, they had become standard practice within American movie-theatres.<sup>454</sup> To capitalise fully upon this new angle, exhibitors began to experiment with short trailers promoting the concession stand during the intermission breaks.<sup>455</sup> It was believed that these advertisements would act as an added incentive in encouraging customers to make a trip to the concession stand. Some took this a step further. In an attempt subliminally to capitalise upon the impulse nature of concession purchases, Fox West Coast began to pump a candy smell into the auditorium ahead of the intermission.<sup>456</sup> While it would be the drive-in theatre that would fully perfect the art of intermission sales, this early experimentation by indoor movie-theatres was an important development. It signified a recognition by exhibitors of the profitability of the concession stand itself but, equally significantly, of the need to find methods by which to maximise sales.

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<sup>453</sup> Anon., 'S.A. Candy Butchers Add Plenty to Gross', *Variety*, 139:3, June 26, 1940, 15.

<sup>454</sup> Anon., 'Intermissions Now Plug Candy, Popcorn', *The Film Daily*, 91:56, March 21, 1947, 1.

<sup>455</sup> Anon., 'Side-line', *Motion Picture Herald*, 141:12, December 21, 1940, 9; Sidney Skolsky, 'Outside Looking In', *The Film Daily*, 79:120, June 20, 1941, 6.

<sup>456</sup> James P. Cunningham, 'Asides and Interludes', *Motion Picture Herald*, 145:2, October 11, 1941, 38.

### **‘A Tendency Toward Soft Drink Venders’: Expanding the Menu<sup>457</sup>**

The success that exhibitors had at the concession stand during screenings of *Gone with The Wind* was a game-changer. Not only were they now more aware of the importance of this added selling time, but encouraged by their success some exhibitors felt emboldened to develop this element of their operation even further. The way in which this manifested itself was that, between 1940 and late 1941, exhibitors at all levels began to expand their concession operations, both in terms of the physical space itself and also the scope of what was on offer.

Movie-theatre modernisation had been an ongoing trend on and off throughout the late 1930s, and continued into April 1942, only halted at that point by government restrictions on non-essential building projects.<sup>458</sup> The concession stand had been a component of this renovation programme, as discussed previously, having migrated from the corners of foyers and lobbies to a more central location. With the success of the newly-inaugurated intermissions period during *Gone with the Wind*, some exhibitors – Fox West Coast amongst them – felt encouraged to take their remodelling efforts further. In October 1941, *Variety* reported that, as a direct consequence of the intermission success, the exhibition chain was in the process of remodelling its lobbies around the concession stand: ‘Architects have been ordered to design lobby bars for the dispensation of ice cream and soft drinks.’<sup>459</sup> Not simply now just a place for customers to purchase these new items, Fox West Coast was introducing

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<sup>457</sup> Anon., ‘Vending Machine Sales Seen on Rise by Hunt’, *The Film Daily: Equipment News*, 79:41, February 28, 1941, 6.

<sup>458</sup> The WPB froze all new movie-theatre construction with immediate effect in April 1942, and halted any non-essential building projects. This included movie-theatre remodelling and modernisation projects. Anon., ‘New Theatre Building Bows to War Demands’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 40:23, April 25, 1942, 47.

<sup>459</sup> Anon., ‘Sweet Interlude’, *Variety*, 144:4, October 1, 1941, 21.

a new element to their movie-theatres: sit-down refreshment ‘bars’. It was not alcohol that was on the menu in these bars, but instead ice cream sundaes, milkshakes, and soda floats.<sup>460</sup>

The development of a sit-down counter service required greater space within the movie-theatre lobby than the candy counter did, hence the need for further movie-theatre remodelling. This trend toward the refreshment bar that emerged from 1939 to late 1941 added a new dynamic to the concession stand. Exhibitors, specifically those belonging to the larger exhibition chains, were now for the first time actively encouraging the public to indulge in refreshments, without necessarily also seeing a film. Unlike more traditional concession-stand items, ice cream sundaes and soda floats could not be taken into the auditorium. Rather, they had to be consumed in the movie-theatre lobby within the confines of the refreshment bar. This is significant because it meant that business did not rely solely any longer on the custom of movie-goers. Attending a film was no longer a prerequisite of visiting the refreshment bar but, rather, anybody off the street was welcome as a customer.

While Fox West Coast launched this particular innovation following its success with intermission sales, the development itself coincides with wider trends occurring within film exhibition at the time. Principally, this reflected the desire on the part of some exhibitors to transition from just movie-theatre into social venue. During this period, a number of exhibitors were beginning to incorporate other elements within their movie-theatres, for instance, bowling alleys, snooker halls, or recreational rooms.<sup>461</sup> This was a significant

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<sup>460</sup> Alcohol was not strictly prohibited within American movie-theatres but exhibitors had to obtain permission and a licence from their local authority in order to serve it – something that proved difficult to obtain. Paramount and Loew’s, for example, both failed in 1941 to attain the necessary approvals to sell wines and beer in the lounges and lobbies of their premiere holdings located in New York City. Anon., ‘Cabaret-Theatre Idea Mullied by Cliff Fischer In N.Y. Policy Change’, *Variety*, 144:10, November 12, 1941, 49.

<sup>461</sup> Helen Kent, ‘Modern Entertainment Plants will be Multiple Enterprises’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 44:24, April 22, 1944, 10-11, 22; Helen Kent, ‘Our Multiple Enterprise in a Postwar Perspective’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 45:2, May 20, 1944, 6-7, 16; Anon., ‘The Midwest Theatre ... A Modified Multiple-Enterprise’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 49:7, June 22, 1946, 12-13.

change and redefinition of what constituted a movie-theatre, heightening its presence within a community as a social space – a place in which people, especially teens and young couples, could spend their free time. This in itself was a reaction to the wider social climate, namely the perceived increase in juvenile delinquency at this time. Historian Richard R. Lingeman comments that: ‘recreation centers or teen canteens sprang up all over the country, designed to keep the kids [referring to teenagers and young people] off the street and in a chaperoned environment.’<sup>462</sup>

In regard to movie-theatres, the refreshment bar was mainly intended to attract extra income: Fox West Coast believed it would ultimately prove more profitable than the candy counter. But it also fits into this wider transition occurring within American film exhibition.<sup>463</sup> The El-Jon Theatre in Brunswick, Missouri, a slightly later example, demonstrates this. Located in a town with a population of approximately 2,000 in 1945, the owners observed that there was no space within the community for teenagers to gather. A fire in 1943 had destroyed the original movie-theatre so, when planning the rebuild, a recreational space was added in the basement.<sup>464</sup> This was a space separate from the auditorium, intended as a space where the community’s youth could come to meet and dance. Outfitted with a jukebox and a refreshment bar, this unconventional addition was a success – both in terms of popularity and also profitability. The movie-theatre in general, such changes suggested, was slowly transitioning. No longer just a space to watch film, it was cementing its position as a social hub within communities. The concession stand was increasingly becoming an important component of this.

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<sup>462</sup> Richard R. Lingeman, *Don't You Know There's A War On? The American Homefront, 1941-1945* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1970), 281.

<sup>463</sup> Anon., ‘FWC May Install Soda Fountains in Theaters’, *The Film Daily*, 80:56, September 18, 1941, 3.

<sup>464</sup> Anon., ‘A Small-Town Theatre with a Modern Accent on Youth’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 47:11, July 21, 1945, 14, 27.

The larger exhibition chains were experimenting with refreshment bars during these pre-war years, but it was not a development that was a natural fit for all movie-theatres. Operating a refreshment bar was a big commitment, in terms of space but also of staff and, therefore, smaller movie-theatres were not suited to this particular refreshment operation. This is demonstrated by the decisions being made, in regards to refreshment bars, in San Francisco during September 1941. Fox West Coast had decided to install soda fountains and bar service in their holdings in the city, the need for additional staff drastically outweighed by the projected profits.<sup>465</sup> Independents in the city, however, were struggling to commit with the same enthusiasm: as *The Film Daily* suggested, there were simply ‘too many headaches’ for those without the support of a major Hollywood studio.<sup>466</sup> While refreshment bars consequently did not spread across the whole country, it was during this period that exhibitors at all levels began to sell soft drinks. Since the 1920s, it had been typical for movie-theatres to have water fountains for patrons’ usage, but previously other soft drinks, specifically soda, had been absent.<sup>467</sup> Catering for a growing public desire for sugary drinks, exhibitors began to trial ways of incorporating this new addition into their existing concession enterprise.

By 1941, there were two methods of selling soda, as outlined by *The Vender-Vane*:

There are two general types – one serving a drink prepared at a carbonating station (syrup and carbonated water mixed and barrelled), and one which carbonates the water and mixes the syrup with the water at the moment of

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<sup>465</sup> Anon., ‘FWC May Install Soda Fountains in Theaters’, *The Film Daily*, 80:56, September 18, 1941, 3.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid.

<sup>467</sup> Mildred Brennan, ‘Health Protection Comes First in Quenching the Public Thirst’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 34:19, April 1, 1939, 66-67; Anon., ‘Drinking Fountain Is a Good-Will Promoter’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 35:1, May 27, 1939, 47.

dispensing. With both types the dispensing is fully automatic upon insertion of a coin, and the drink is dispensed in a paper cup.<sup>468</sup>

Readily available within the American market, much to the chagrin of Coca-Cola (who would not infiltrate American movie-theatres on any scale until after World War II), it was non-branded cola drinks which proved the most popular with audiences.<sup>469</sup> Other sodas also entered movie-theatres: orangeade, root beer, and fruit punch to name but a few. By late 1941, the transition to offering soda was still in its infancy and not without controversy. Trade press magazines reported that in some areas, Chicago and Milwaukee for example, local fire departments and building inspectors were cautious about permitting this new addition.<sup>470</sup> Their concern centred on the instability of the gas in carbonated drinks, and its potential explosivity.

During 1940/41, in this first initial phase, soft drinks were making gradual inroads into American movie-theatres, with positive results. In late 1940, for example, twenty of Warner Brothers' holdings in Chicago and Philadelphia installed Coca-Cola dispensers (bought not from Coca-Cola, but instead a third party concessionaire company called Vending Drink Company, which was also hired to maintain the machines).<sup>471</sup> *The Film Daily* reported that these Coca-Cola machines could dispense up to 300 drinks without needing to be refilled, and the chain hoped it would prove a lucrative addition to their refreshment operations.<sup>472</sup> Discussing this new angle in February 1942, a spokesman for the movie-theatre

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<sup>468</sup> Anon., 'Beverage Vending, and Refreshment Sales Promotion', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 143:1, April 5, 1941, 24.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid., 26; Anon., 'Local Burnups At Growing Pop Sales In Lobbies', *Variety*, 139:8, July 31, 1940, 109.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid.; Anon., 'Popcorn Odors in Theatres Cause Milwaukee Bldg. Dept.'s Crackdown', *Variety*, 139:5, July 10, 1940, 22.

<sup>471</sup> Anon., '20 Warner Houses Will Get Coca Cola Machines', *The Film Daily*, 78:85, October 29, 1940, 10; Anon., 'Coca Cola in Warner Houses', *Motion Picture Herald*, 141:8, November 23, 1940, 50.

<sup>472</sup> Anon., 'Candy Nets Chi. Sweet "Take"', *The Film Daily*, 79:16, January 23, 1941, 4.

wholesaler National Theatre Supply noted that there has recently been ‘a tendency toward soft drink venders in theaters.’<sup>473</sup> However, expansion into this new concession angle was temporarily halted in the years between 1942 to 1945, due to wartime shortages of sugar and a dearth of dispensers and related equipment. It was something that would be picked up again, with renewed vigour, by exhibitors at all levels and locations in the immediate post-war years – a period in which there would be a glut of new concession-related equipment, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

At the time of the United States’ entry into World War II in December 1941, the nation’s movie-theatre concession stands were thriving. The Midtown Theatre in Detroit, Michigan, for example, reported that depending on the time of year it was making 20 to 40 percent of its profits from concession sales alone.<sup>474</sup> Popular with audiences and highly profitable, by late 1941 the concession stand was entering a new phase. A more dominant, centralised location and gradual expansion in the menu, specifically into soft drinks, marked the concession stand’s transition from side-line to legitimate business in its own right.<sup>475</sup> The concession stand was evolving, bolstered by the increasing attention that exhibitors and trade press publications alike were investing into this avenue of film exhibition.

This growing success was largely due to developments occurring within American movie-theatres and the wider film exhibition industry, but it is necessary also to acknowledge the wider context. The American film industry was prospering at this time, a product of the more stable economy following America’s slow recovery from the Great Depression. While poor conditions continued to linger throughout the 1930s, the outlook at the close of the decade was improving and, as Lingeman has described it, by 1941 the American economy

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<sup>473</sup> Anon., ‘Vending Machine Sales Seen on Rise by Hunt’, *The Film Daily: Equipment News*, 79:41, February 28, 1941, 6.

<sup>474</sup> Anon., ‘Case History of a Cleverly Handled Conversion Project’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 40:3, December 6, 1941, 54-56.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

was ‘semi booming’.<sup>476</sup> This was largely a consequence of the increased output of the country’s industrial sectors, producing goods and materials for the war.<sup>477</sup> Increased production led to a greater demand for labour, which helped to further reduce the unemployment levels still lingering from the Great Depression period.<sup>478</sup> In turn, this had a positive impact on the prosperity of many American households, and the public once again had the supplementary income available to spend at movie-theatres – at both the box office and concession stand.<sup>479</sup> Box office figures during the war years showed marked improvement from the Depression period, with box office figures remaining consistent at an estimated weekly attendance rate of 85 million in the years between 1941 and 1945.<sup>480</sup> Most signs before Pearl Harbour pointed towards the continued growth of candy sales within the nation’s movie-theatres. Following America’s entry into World War II in December 1941, however, domestic conditions changed in a way which quickly threatened this non-filmic aspect of film exhibition.

### **‘Confection Famine’: Sugar Shortages and Rationing<sup>481</sup>**

The wartime economy helped America to shake off the last vestiges of the Great Depression and the economy as a whole flourished. The December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbour, however, ultimately led to the deployment of thousands of American troops across the globe to engage in warfare on the frontline and most of the nation’s industries becoming fully

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<sup>476</sup> Lingeman, *Don’t You Know There’s A War On?*, 15.

<sup>477</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 128.

<sup>478</sup> Michael C. C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 115, 117.

<sup>479</sup> Martin Folly, *The United States and World War II: The Awakening Giant* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 81; Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 13.

<sup>480</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 195.

<sup>481</sup> Anon., ‘Candy Days In Chicago Are of “Hard” Variety’, *The Film Daily*, 84:21, July 30, 1943, 8.

committed to producing for the war effort. As will be discussed, production and cultivation of all non-essential goods ceased, with attention instead directed towards feeding the war machine. The effect of the war on the American home front was relatively small, especially when compared to countries geographically located on the frontline of the conflict. Since the United States was not in this position, the biggest impact on the American public came in the form of shortages and the rationing of goods.

The American government set up many new departments and governing bodies to oversee various aspects of the war effort, several of which were tasked with regulating goods and products. The War Production Board (WPB), established in January 1942, is one example. Its role was to manage production of goods on the home front, which meant curtailing all non-essential civilian activity and controlling what goods could be manufactured within the United States.<sup>482</sup> The WPB had a significant impact on the operation of the concession stand, notably by halting the production of concession equipment (for example, popcorn machines and candy counters) as discussed later in this chapter. Yet it is another regulatory board, the Office of Price Administration (OPA), which will be discussed here. Predating America's official entry into World War II, the OPA was established in April 1941 (initially named the Office of Price Administration and Civilian Supply, the name was shortened in August 1941) to help combat early material shortages that came as a result of Japanese disruption of peacetime trade routes. Its purpose was twofold: to regulate the price of goods and to ration items.<sup>483</sup> As the war progressed, it was the latter of these roles that would have an increasingly severe impact upon the nation's movie-theatre concession stands.

With the country now officially at war, the year 1942 saw several items tightly controlled by the OPA. Initially this scarcity (and subsequent rationing) applied to resources

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<sup>482</sup> Allan M. Winkler, *Home Front U.S.A.: America during World War II* (Wheeling, W.V.: Harlan Davidson, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2000), 9.

<sup>483</sup> Lingeman, *Don't You Know There's A War On?*, 234-235.

needed for the production of material goods for the war effort, the most notable examples being copper, aluminium, rubber, and gasoline.<sup>484</sup> The shortage in rubber, for example, led to a tyre shortage and calls for the American public to donate rubber to the government. Movie-theatres, the social hub of many communities (especially in more rural areas), were used as drop-off locations for rubber and scrap metal.<sup>485</sup> Contributing to the war effort, this role further cemented the movie-theatre at the heart of communities and boosted their reputation within the wider society.

In regard to the general effects of the war on movie-theatres, and the concession stand in particular, however, the rationing of these specific items at first had a minimal impact. The biggest effect came from the rationing of gasoline which meant that the delivery of supplies (candy bars, but also more general items like film cannisters and cleaning supplies) to movie-theatres in some areas – particularly rural locations – were affected.<sup>486</sup> The only other hint of disturbance to the concession stand specifically related to the packaging of confectionary goods. From November 1941, tinfoil, made from aluminium, was banned.<sup>487</sup> This was the material that was used to package chewing gum, so manufacturers had to find an alternative which had a knock-on effect on movie-theatre supplies for a short period – no more than a few weeks. By August 1942, the cellophane used to package candy (favoured because its transparency was more visually appealing) had also been barred by the OPA, forcing manufacturers to use paper wrappers.<sup>488</sup> Aside from slight delays to some movie-theatre

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<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>485</sup> Ansel M. Moore, 'A Public Service... If you choose to make it such', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 42:4, December 5, 1942, 6; Anon., 'Loew's Collecting Scrap Rubber', *The Film Daily*, 81:126, June 30, 1942, 11; Anon., 'The B & K Stands For Blue and Khaki', *The Film Daily*, 83:48, March 12, 1943, 6; Doherty, *Projections of War*, 82.

<sup>486</sup> Anon., 'War Cuts Summer Stock Shows by 39 Per Cent', *Motion Picture Herald*, 148:1, July 4, 1942, 28; Anon., 'Rationitis: What Theatres Can Do to Help Relieve It', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 42:8, January 2, 1943, 16.

<sup>487</sup> Anon., 'Tinfoil Ban Off', *Motion Picture Herald*, 145:10, December 6, 1941, 27.

<sup>488</sup> Anon., '\$14,000,000 Annual Candy Sales Are Threatened', *Motion Picture Herald*, 148:5, August 1, 1942, 27.

supplies, rationing of these materials had very minimal impact upon the operation of the concession stand. It was with the rationing of certain foodstuffs that the main threat to this non-filmic exhibition practice appeared.

Over the course of the war, non-essential items like coffee, honey, and butter would all be rationed intermittently for short periods when supplies ran low.<sup>489</sup> There was one food item, however, that faced severe shortages from as early as 1941, and was subsequently, rationed for the entirety of the war and many months afterwards (April 1942-June 1947).<sup>490</sup> That item was sugar, and its wartime dearth stemmed from two key issues relating both to supply and to diverting what little resources there were into the war effort. Extremely scarce and strictly controlled by the government, it was the lack of sugar within America which would have the biggest impact upon the traditional concession stand model.

Sugar was an item that the United States largely imported from overseas. Shipments from Hawaii, Cuba, and the Caribbean all helping to feed America's sweet tooth. The vast majority of America's sugar at this time, however, came from the Philippines. Shortly after Pearl Harbour, the Philippines came under Japanese occupation. Despite a continued yet limited supply from Hawaii and the Caribbean, being cut off from the Philippines meant that the supply of sugar within the mainland American market drastically diminished from what it had been.<sup>491</sup> This situation led, in early 1942, to its rationing. The confectionary industry was not only severely impacted by the lack of sugar but also shortages of other key ingredients necessary for the production of chocolate and candy goods. As the war progressed the disruption of trade routes would similarly drastically reduce the availability of cocoa beans, peanuts, and corn syrup (a sweetener).<sup>492</sup> Their reduced availability, therefore, had a

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<sup>489</sup> Lingeman, *Don't You Know There's A War On?*, 245-246, 263.

<sup>490</sup> *Ibid.*, 244; Winkler, *Home Front U.S.A.*, 44.

<sup>491</sup> Smith, *Popped Culture*, 109-110.

<sup>492</sup> Phil M. Daly, 'Monday Morning Memos', *The Film Daily*, 92:29, August 11, 1947, 5; Smith H. Cady, Jr., 'Candy for Dessert! Service and a Fine Source of Profit', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 50:5, December 7, 1946, 32.

significant impact upon the American confectionary industry. Despite this, confectionary production did not stop entirely – it was just that what little was produced did not usually enter the domestic American market. Instead, the bulk of this output, reportedly 60 percent by 1943, was sent to American troops stationed across the globe.<sup>493</sup>

Major companies, like Hershey and Mars, secured contracts with the American government which enabled them to continue production uninterrupted throughout the war. In the case of Hershey, the company agreed to give 70 percent of its output to American troops, in return for the government's continued supply of the sugar and cocoa needed to produce Hershey chocolate bars and M&M's.<sup>494</sup> Both of these items became staples of American military ration packs. Mars struck a similar deal with the American government, and so the two giants of the American confectionary industry continued production largely unaffected. This was not the case for the majority of the country's smaller candy manufacturers who, facing staff shortages, rationing, and heavy government regulation, largely shut down production.<sup>495</sup> With Hershey and Mars focused on supplying the troops, and smaller companies' production drastically reduced if not completely halted, candy and chocolate bars became virtually unobtainable on the home front.<sup>496</sup> For the nation's movie-theatres who were in the process of building up their second box office on the sale of these items, this was not welcome news.

The year 1941 was a boom year for the movie-theatre concession stand, its popularity with audiences growing exponentially and profits at an all-time high.<sup>497</sup> This was short-lived,

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<sup>493</sup> Anon., 'Candy Sales Increase 35%, But Costs Rise Too', *Motion Picture Herald*, 152:3, July 17, 1943, 25; Anon., 'Chi. Candy Bar Shortage', *The Film Daily*, 85:87, May 3, 1944, 3.

<sup>494</sup> Joël Glenn Brenner, *The Emperors of Chocolate: Inside the Secret World of Hershey & Mars* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999), 153.

<sup>495</sup> Anon., 'WMC Takes Candy Makers For Philly War Jobs', *The Film Daily*, 87:48, March 12, 1945, 2.

<sup>496</sup> Smith, *Popped Culture*, 110.

<sup>497</sup> Anon., '\$1,000,000 Hub Candy' Take', *The Film Daily*, 79:43, March 4, 1941, 18; Sidney Skolsky, 'Outside Looking In', *The Film Daily*, 79:120, June 20, 1941, 6.

however, as the conditions previously described rapidly plunged exhibitors into a ‘confection famine’.<sup>498</sup> The famine first appeared in early 1942 with intermittent candy shortages reported throughout the country. The introduction of candy rationing in April 1942, only served to worsen this situation. Throughout the rest of that year and early 1943, film trade press magazines continued to report on shortages and problems with candy supplies for movie-theatres in all areas of the United States. *The Film Daily*, for example, reported on conditions in Chicago, capturing the difficulty facing exhibitors in the city: ‘many theater owners are finding it tough to secure sufficient candy supplies for their [vending] machines. Circuits have been hard hit by the confection famine, with the number of candy bars offered to patrons shrinking each week.’<sup>499</sup> Such shortages were echoed across the country.<sup>500</sup> Conditions rapidly deteriorated further in the following months: in July 1942, *Motion Picture Herald* stated that there was reportedly only one year’s worth of candy left within the American domestic market.<sup>501</sup>

Sugar rationing had first been introduced by the OPA in April 1942, but it was only when pre-existing surplus supplies began dwindling in the latter months of that year that exhibitors’ desperation truly began to rise. In the following months, exhibitors had still, for the most part, been able to get a hold of supplies – while less than before the war, they still had at least some access to candy stock. Candy vending profits had exceeded 7 million dollars in 1942, a large proportion coming from the country’s largest exhibition chains (Paramount, RKO, Warners, and National Theatre).<sup>502</sup> By November of that year, however,

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<sup>498</sup> Anon., ‘Candy Days In Chicago Are of “Hard” Variety’, *The Film Daily*, 84:21, July 30, 1943, 8.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid.

<sup>500</sup> Bob Wile, ‘Managers’ Round Table: “Men at Work”’, *Motion Picture Herald*, 151:3, April 17, 1943, 57.

<sup>501</sup> Anon., ‘A Year of Candy’, *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 148:4, July 25, 1942, 6.

<sup>502</sup> Anon., ‘Talk About Sweet Coin, Theatre Candy Stands Gross \$7,000,000 Yrly.’, *Variety*, 150:4, April 7, 1943, 1.

these limited stocks were depleting rapidly. This scarcity resulted in several desperate attempts by exhibitors to plug the hole.

One initial knee-jerk response was to attempt to obtain candy from neighbouring countries unaffected by wartime rationing, mainly Mexico.<sup>503</sup> Charles Skouras, then the President of the National Theatre chain, was one such exhibitor who made the journey south of the border:

Charles Skouras ... returned from Mexico last week without any Mexican theatres, but with plenty of candy – hundreds of thousands of pounds to be delivered on specific dates. Skouras ... made the special trip to Mexico to get supplies due to the growing candy shortage in the U. S.<sup>504</sup>

Skouras was one of the more notable names to make this trip, but exhibitors located in the border states also turned to Mexico to supply them with candy. This was a short-term fix, however. It was not a sustainable solution particularly after the Mexican government banned the exportation of candy and chewing gum to America in May 1943. *Variety* commented that this decision had had a particularly negative impact on the exhibition chains Fox West Coast and National Theatre which had just ‘placed orders for carloads of candy and chewing gum’.<sup>505</sup> With this no longer a viable solution, exhibitors began to re-evaluate their options, and look for alternatives.<sup>506</sup> Fruit, raisins, dill pickles, and pickled eggs were all items that

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<sup>503</sup> Anon., ‘Foreign-Made Candy Stands’ Solace’, *The Film Daily*, 83:78, April 23, 1943, 13.

<sup>504</sup> Anon., ‘Talk About Sweet Coin, Theatre Candy Stands Gross \$7,000,000 Yrly.’, *Variety*, 150:4, April 7, 1943, 1.

<sup>505</sup> Anon., ‘Mex Sweet Tooth Bans Candy Export to U.S.’, *Variety*, 150:10, May 19, 1943, 20.

<sup>506</sup> Exhibitors would trial and substitute other foodstuffs in an attempt to fill their candy counters, but cigarettes were also proposed as an alternative item to vend from the empty candy vending machines. In many states, movie-theatres operated their concession stands under a confectionary license, which by the 1940s, also permitted the sale of cigarettes. Anon., ‘Cigarette Days New Stimulant for B. O.’, *The Film Daily*, 86:121, December 26, 1944, 6; Anon., ‘Chicago’, *Boxoffice*, 46:9, January 6, 1945, 66.

exhibitors considered and trialled, with varying levels of success.<sup>507</sup> While they filled the gaps within displays, none of these items would replicate candy's popularity with American audiences.

Even in this difficult circumstance, candy did not completely disappear from the country's movie-theatres. By 1943, with the agreement of the U. S. government, a small quota of candy was set aside for the film exhibition industry.<sup>508</sup> This privileged position gave the nation's movie-theatres an edge over other retailers, many of whom had stopped selling candy completely due to supply problems.<sup>509</sup> With little competition and a steady (yet highly reduced) supply, movie-theatres became one of the primary retailers of confectionary goods on the home front. Despite the shortages, therefore, the movie-theatre concession stand continued to limp on.<sup>510</sup>

Candy rationing and shortages continued throughout the war years and into the years following the coming of peace. While the OPA officially ended sugar rationing in June 1947, shortages and high prices for confectionary goods persisted into 1948. The primary ingredients of the confectionary industry remained scarce despite the cessation of rationing, and the protracted shortages meant that candy manufacturers struggled to fulfil demand.<sup>511</sup> That demand itself was only growing with the return of American troops from the frontline.<sup>512</sup> In order to survive, many confectionary companies decided to increase the price of their goods whilst also decreasing their size and often their quality too.<sup>513</sup> This had a

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<sup>507</sup> Anon., 'Theater Candy Counters Turn to Substitutes As Armed Forces Get First Call on Sweets', *The Film Daily*, 82:96, November 17, 1942, 6; Anon., 'Bonanza Biz in Portland, Ore.', *The Film Daily*, 82:124, December 29, 1942, 3; Anon., 'That Hitler!', *Variety*, 150:10, May 19, 1943, 21.

<sup>508</sup> Anon., 'Boost Expected in Theat. Candy Supply', *The Film Daily*, 84:106, December 3, 1943, 15.

<sup>509</sup> Anon., 'Huge Jump in Theater Candy Sales Is Recorded', *The Film Daily*, 84:88, November 5, 1943, 15.

<sup>510</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>511</sup> Anon., 'Theaters Find Candy Scarce', *The Film Daily*, 89:51, March 15, 1946, 10.

<sup>512</sup> Brenner, *The Emperors of Chocolate*, 171.

<sup>513</sup> Phil M. Daly, 'Week-End Report', *The Film Daily*, 90:63, September 27, 1946, 7; Anon., 'OPA Angle', *Variety*, 164:5, October 9, 1946, 27.

knock-on effect on exhibitors. Candy was now more expensive to purchase, leaving exhibitors with a decision to make: did they make their customers also pay more, despite the reduced size of the items? Many, feeling they had no other choice, made this decision, regardless of any backlash from unhappy customers. As a result, candy bars increased in price from 5 cents (the typical pre-war price) to in excess of 10 cents by mid-1946.<sup>514</sup> There was speculation that if the bad conditions persisted, exhibitors would be forced to increase prices even further, potentially charging upwards of 60 to 80 cents.<sup>515</sup> The concession stand continued to be plagued by these problems in 1948, with no clear sign of when conditions would improve.

Candy shortages in the years during and immediately after World War II were damaging to the nation's movie-theatre concession stands. What had in the preceding decades been a growing source of additional income for movie-theatres across the United States was negatively impacted by exhibitors' inability to maintain a steady supply of candy and other confectionary goods. While it did not disappear completely, the particular conditions of this period did bring to an end the gradual and growing success that candy had experienced in the nation's movie-theatres in the preceding decades. A challenging period for exhibitors, the candy dearth opened the door for other items to emerge. Exhibitors trialled several refreshments during the war years in the hopes of feeding their audiences' growing appetite. Raisins and pickles had limited appeal, but one item did ultimately fill the void that was left by candy: popcorn. Initially just another alternative trialled out of desperation, the rapid success that popcorn experienced during the war years helped cement its dominance within American movie-theatres.

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<sup>514</sup> Phil M. Daly, 'This and That', *The Film Daily*, 90:2, July 2, 1946, 4.

<sup>515</sup> Anon., 'Theaters Find Candy Scarce', *The Film Daily*, 89:51, March 15, 1946, 10.

## **Part II: Popcorn, the New Concession King, 1942-1945**

### **A Brief History: Pre-1942**

Popcorn is today synonymous with cinema and the act of movie-going. An almost ritualistic act for many, a stop to purchase popcorn is an engrained component of the movie-going experience. Lyons' ethnographical study into popcorn within the modern multiplex is a testament to this. His interviews, conducted with British cinema-goers in Nottingham, demonstrate that for many its consumption is an important movie-going habit.<sup>516</sup> Given its important status within film exhibition today, popcorn has been conspicuously absent from this thesis thus far, only briefly discussed in chapter one. As earlier discussion of the 1920s demonstrated, it was not so much that popcorn was a new refreshment by the 1940s, but that its presence within the movie-theatre in earlier decades had been minimal.

Popcorn had established a small foothold in the American movie-theatre during the early 1920s. For several decades this was confined predominantly to the Midwest, an area that had a strong pre-existing cultural relationship with popcorn, and maize more generally. A Midwestern delicacy, in cinema's early decades popcorn was the perfect money-maker for independent exhibitors hoping to make a little extra profit. Its success in the Midwest was not enough, however, to encourage exhibitors further afield to trial the snack, especially when candy and confectionary goods were already yielding significant profits.

While popcorn machine companies, like Cretors and Manley, had begun to target movie-theatres from the 1920s and manufactured popcorn machines designed specifically for indoor use (electric-powered, smaller, and more compact than the outdoor models), there were still barriers to overcome. Movie-theatres and popcorn machines during this period simply did not appear compatible. As Smith has pointed out:

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<sup>516</sup> Lyons, 'What about the Popcorn?', 325.

... most theaters did not have outside vents. Early popcorn machines filled theaters with an unpleasant, penetrating smoky odor. Owners interested in selling popcorn were required to construct vents, which ran up the expenses and reduced the profits ... Until the 1930s most theater owners considered popcorn to be a liability rather than an asset.<sup>517</sup>

For much of the country, popcorn still remained a peripheral refreshment item within American movie-theatres by the end of the 1920s. This position shifted only slightly during the Depression years.

Problems with poor ventilation persisted into the 1930s but the Great Depression forced exhibitors to re-evaluate their stance on many things, including popcorn. Desperate to turn a profit, some – typically small independents located in small towns in the Midwest, but also at this time, in the Southern states as well – turned to popcorn as one form of salvation. Cheap to produce but with a high profit margin, it was a hit with audiences. Cynthia Clampitt has suggested that this was because popcorn was a small yet affordable luxury for the American public.<sup>518</sup> Whilst it did require exhibitors to make adjustments to their lobbies to accommodate this addition, the extra profit that popcorn brought was enough to encourage many to incorporate it within their concession operations. This was a development which continued in the second half of the 1930s, as the difficult conditions of the Depression lessened and exhibitors undertook extensive modernisation projects. In order to comply with strict building regulations, improved ventilation was one area exhibitors invested in. *Motion Picture Herald*, writing in 1946, estimated that it cost approximately \$1,000 to make the necessary alterations to be able to install a popcorn machine.<sup>519</sup> After extensive remodelling, in combination with the production of better, more sophisticated popcorn machines, popcorn

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<sup>517</sup> Smith, *Popped Culture*, 100-101.

<sup>518</sup> Clampitt, *Midwest Maize*, 118.

<sup>519</sup> George Schutz, 'Catering to America's New Popcorn Habit', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 163:1, April 6, 1946, 14.

gradually flooded American movie-theatres. While state building regulations and sporadic machine fires would occasionally challenge this stream of revenue, by late 1941 exhibitors were in a position where popcorn machines and their movie-theatres were finally compatible and an increasingly desirable pairing.<sup>520</sup>

Advancements in equipment and a wider appreciation of the profitability of the concession stand meant that it was no longer out of desperation that exhibitors turned to popcorn. Rather, exhibitors were motivated by the food's increasing popularity with the American public. There was already a growing awareness within the film exhibition industry, notably amongst trade press magazines and independent exhibitors, of popcorn's popularity. The food's sheer profitability was also becoming an increasingly attractive motivation too. An attractive sales pitch regularly reiterated through this period was popcorn's impressive profit margin: 70 percent profit, equating to 70 cents on every dollar.<sup>521</sup> This was in contrast to candy and other confectionary goods, which in 1941 had an estimated profit margin of between 40 and 50 percent.<sup>522</sup> More labour-intensive than confectionary goods, popcorn had to be popped and seasoned prior to serving, but it was nonetheless an attractive prospect for exhibitors – especially as, unlike candy (whose sales tended to drop during the summer months), popcorn was a food that held a year-round appeal.<sup>523</sup> As a result, installation of

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<sup>520</sup> Fire inspectors and building regulators in cities across America had been wary of popcorn machines but in the aftermath of the Boston Coconut Grove Fire in November 1942 (over 450 perished in a nightclub fire), regulations tightened. The movie-theatre concession stand became a target, with attempts in some areas – for example, New York City and Seattle, Washington – to ban popcorn machines. Anon., 'All N. Y. Theatres, Indoor Amusements Face Severe "Special Firemen" Edict', *Variety*, 148:13, December 2, 1942, 24; Anon., 'Ban Popcorn Machines From Seattle's Lobbies', *The Film Daily*, 82:120, December 22, 1942, 4.

<sup>521</sup> Advance Mfg. Co., 'Popcorn Machine Advertisement', *Motion Picture Herald*, 135:5, May 6, 1939, 63; Anon., 'Popcorn Machines Go Modern', *Motion Picture Herald*, 139:7, May 18, 1940, 64; C. Cretors & Co., 'Popcorn Machine Advertisement', *Motion Picture Herald*, 138:8, February 24, 1940, 46.

<sup>522</sup> Anon., 'The Way to Good Profits in Theatre Refreshment Selling', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 142:6, February 8, 1941, 29.

<sup>523</sup> George Schutz, 'Catering to America's New Popcorn Habit', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 163:1, April 6, 1946, 14.

popcorn machines grew at this time, especially in small towns and rural areas.<sup>524</sup> By January 1941, *Motion Picture Herald* reported that popcorn was outselling candy in many movie-theatres in the South and Midwest.<sup>525</sup> It was, however, still a regional favourite, confined largely to these two areas.<sup>526</sup>

In the months preceding World War II, popcorn was gradually attracting greater attention from the wider film exhibition industry. It is fair to suggest that while World War II was a significant factor in its meteoric rise, as the following section of this chapter will discuss, it accelerated a process which would likely have occurred organically – granted at a much slower pace. The particular conditions of World War II, specifically the confectionary famine, acted as the match that ignited the flame of popcorn’s ascendancy, leading it to spread at an unprecedented rate. So much so that, by 1946, popcorn had overcome all regional boundaries to become a universal fixture of American film exhibition:

The eating of popcorn at the theatre ... has become pretty much a national institution. Only the Northeast, and principally New England, is not yet substantially invaded ... In some areas, according to surveys of our territorial reporters, more than 90% of the theatres sell popcorn; in the others except the Northeast, at least 50% of them do ... And these figures, nearly everywhere, represent substantial increase in the practice since the last pre-war years.<sup>527</sup>

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<sup>524</sup> In 1939, the *Motion Picture Herald* had commented that while candy dominated in metropolitan areas, popcorn was often more popular in rural areas. An assertion that was reinforced in 1941 after *The Film Daily* reported that while popcorn machines were a fixture of movie-theatres in the rural Midwest, they remained largely absent from Chicago. Anon., ‘Restraint Charged in \$10,000,000 Theatre Candy Vending Business’, *Motion Picture Herald*, 134:12, March 25, 1939, 53; Anon., ‘Candy Nets Chi. Sweet “Take”’, *The Film Daily*, 79:16, January 23, 1941, 4.

<sup>525</sup> Anon., ‘Theatre Stressed As Profitable Sales Point for Popcorn’, *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 142:2, January 11, 1941, 22-23.

<sup>526</sup> George Schutz, ‘Catering to America’s New Popcorn Habit’, *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 163:1, April 6, 1946, 13-14.

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.*

Whereas in earlier decades it had been unusual to offer popcorn, by the immediate post-war years a movie-theatre was an anomaly if it did not. Discussing how the demand for popcorn machines and supplies grew and spread exponentially during the years 1942 to 1945, the following section will analyse how and why popcorn emerged from World War II the indisputable king of the concession stand.

### **‘Popcorn is a Fighting Food’: A Wartime Goldmine<sup>528</sup>**

Rationing was one of the most significant consequences of World War II on the American home front. Strict sugar rationing by the OPA had targeted movie-theatres’ supplies of candy and the newly introduced soft drinks, leading exhibitors to experiment with alternatives.<sup>529</sup> Pickles, raisins, and fruits had all failed to appeal to American audiences, and it was popcorn that was found to satisfy audiences’ movie-time appetites. One of the key factors for this success was that it was not subject to rationing.<sup>530</sup> In fact, the opposite happened. Readily available throughout the war years, popcorn cultivation, rather than decreasing, grew with the support of the American government between 1942 and 1945.

Just as the OPA was responsible for the rationing of materials and goods, the WPB had control over production during World War II. It was the WPB, for example, who were responsible for halting production by small confectionary companies as well as concession stand equipment manufacturers. This was because all non-essential production was curtailed, with factories being repurposed to produce goods for the war effort. Not only governing manufacturing, the WPB also exerted control over agricultural output, and under directive L-

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<sup>528</sup> Chas. E. Darden & Co., ‘Popcorn Advertisement’, *Boxoffice*, 43:15, August 21, 1943, 88.

<sup>529</sup> Anon., ‘Popcorn Supply Seen Holding’, *Motion Picture Herald*, 148:5, August 1, 1942, 27.

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*

65, ordered the cessation of all non-essential crop cultivation during the war.<sup>531</sup> This was a logical step to take: the United States was having not only to support its own populace, but also American troops and allied forces. In order to do this, the U.S. government tightened control over what crops were grown, and by prioritising essential crops (for instance, wheat and barley) established a stable and reliable supply. What was peculiar was that popcorn, a crop that only served two purposes (as animal feed and movie-theatre popcorn), was among the crops deemed essential by the U.S. government. This was not a decision that met with universal support, and popcorn's inclusion drew criticism. As Smith has outlined, some questioned popcorn's necessity for the war effort, calling for its cultivation and processing to be restricted if not entirely proscribed.<sup>532</sup>

While some queried popcorn's essential status, the WPB was convinced in 1942 by the persuasive arguments presented by the newly-formed National Popcorn Association. Described by Smith as an 'ad hoc group of [popcorn] processors and manufacturers', this collective had an invested interest in ensuring popcorn's continued cultivation.<sup>533</sup> The key way in which they curried the WPB's favour was with the publication of popcorn propaganda, specifically a forty-two-page leaflet titled *Popcorn is a Fighting Food*. Smith has described how this pamphlet sold popcorn as a highly nutritious food:

The pamphlet maintained that a pound of popcorn contained 'approximately twice as many food energy units as a pound of Round Steak, 2 ½ times as many as a pound of Eggs, and 6 times as many units as a pound of Milk.' It also reported that popcorn supplied roughage and was 'a universally liked food' and a 'moral builder'.<sup>534</sup>

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<sup>531</sup> Smith, *Popped Culture*, 108.

<sup>532</sup> Ibid.

<sup>533</sup> Ibid.

<sup>534</sup> Ibid.

The National Popcorn Association's lobbying efforts succeeded and, despite any outside controversy, popcorn was labelled an essential wartime crop – a status which would see its cultivation grow exponentially during this period.

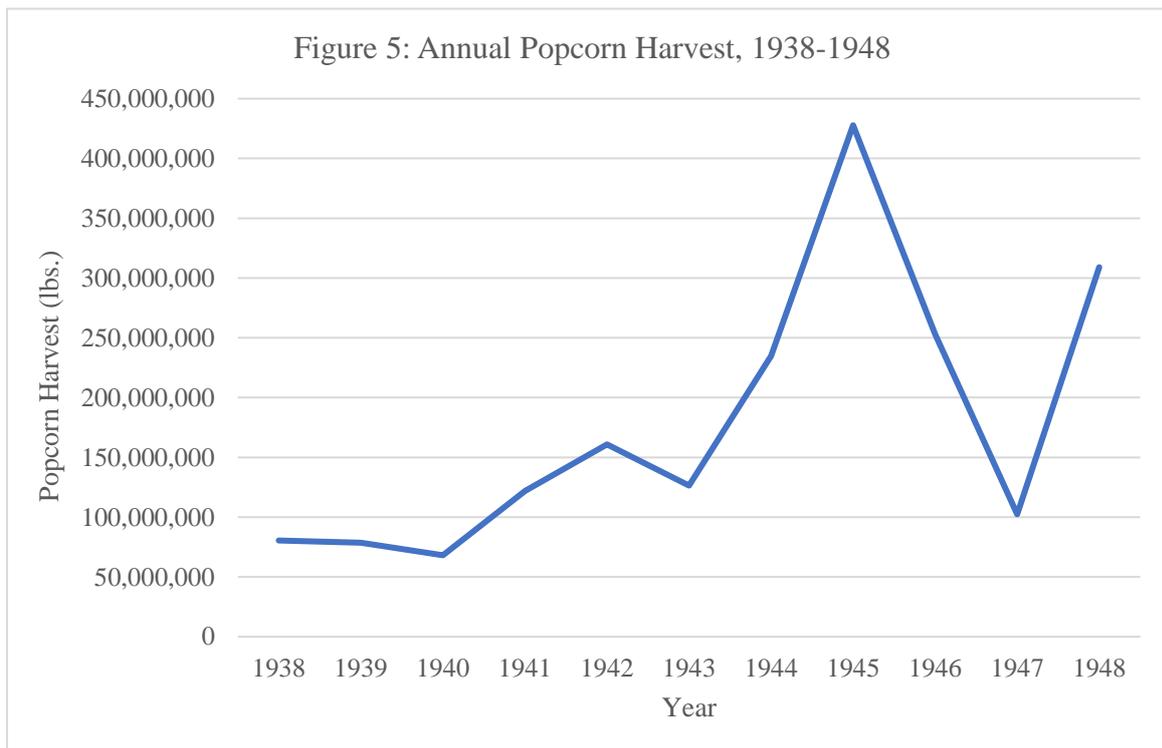
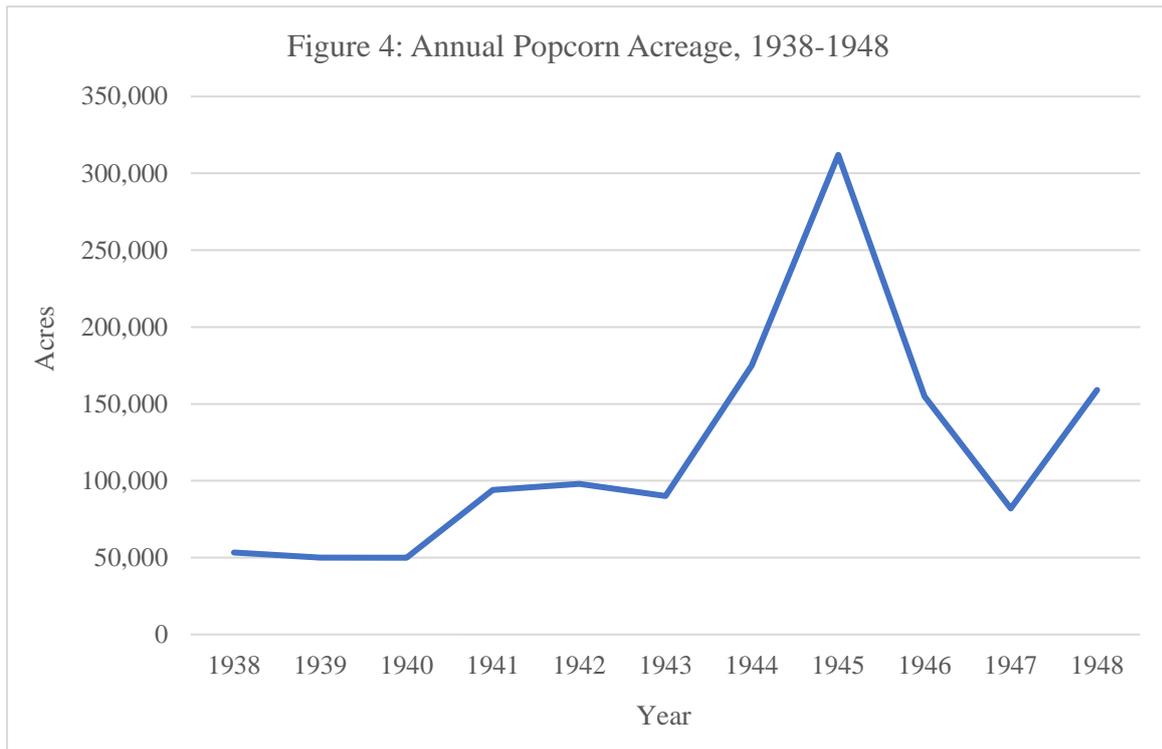
Needing to feed the home front, as well as export provisions to American troops and the allied countries, America's agricultural output increased significantly during the war years. According to food historian Amy Bentley, the country's general yield – combined livestock and crop – was more than 50 percent what it had been in the pre-war period.<sup>535</sup> Deemed essential by the U.S. government, the continued cultivation of a number of crops aside from popcorn, including wheat, barley, corn, oats, and rye, was secured at this time. Close analysis of crop reports issued annually by the U.S. Department of Agriculture reveal the significant increase in cultivation of these key crops during World War II. With high nutritional values they were essential for the production of a variety of foodstuffs, for instance, cereals, breads, and animal feed.

Data compiled from the crop reports of the U.S. Department of Agriculture demonstrate that popcorn cultivation increased significantly over the course of World War II. It demonstrates two key factors: an increase in popcorn acreage, and a substantial rise in the annual popcorn harvest.<sup>536</sup> The number of acres of popcorn planted grew significantly over the course of the period, as Figure 4 demonstrates: from 53,400 acres in 1938, to 98,000 acres in 1942, and peaking at 312,000 acres in 1945. This is reflected in an expansion in the geographical areas growing the crop, as by the end of the period cultivation was no longer confined solely to the Midwest. In 1938, for example, the three key producing states of

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<sup>535</sup> Amy Bentley, 'Introduction', *Food and Foodways*, 6:2 (1996), 74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710.1996.9962030>.

<sup>536</sup> Data compiled from analysis of annual issues of Crop Reporting Board: Bureau of Agricultural Economics, *Annual Summary: Acreage, Yield, and Production of Principal Crops*, United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., December 1938-1948. Full collection available from Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/search.php?query=United+States.+Bureau+of+Agricultural+Economics+popcorn&sort=-date> [accessed March 13, 2021].



Data for both graphs compiled from analysis of Crop Reporting Board: Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Annual Summary: Acreage, Yield, and Production of Principal Crops, United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., December 1938-1948. Full collection available from Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/search.php?query=United+States.+Bureau+of+Agricultural+Economics+popcorn&sort=-date> [accessed March 13, 2021].

yellow pearl popcorn (a popcorn hybrid engineered in 1931 to be resistant to disease and yield larger expansion when popped), then the most popular variety, were Iowa, Illinois, and Ohio.<sup>537</sup> By 1943, popcorn was being grown commercially in eleven American states. Most were still in the Midwest, but several outside of the region had also begun to cultivate the crop, notably Texas and Massachusetts.<sup>538</sup>

In regard to the annual popcorn harvest, the war years also saw much larger yields than the years preceding World War II, as Figure 5 shows. The annual popcorn harvest in 1938 was 80 million pounds, by 1942 this had risen to 160 million pounds, and by 1945 the popcorn harvest was 428 million pounds. Figures 4 and 5 illustrate not only the general increase in popcorn cultivation during this period but also evidence the occasional dips in the wartime popcorn harvest – the product of intermittent bad weather, as will be discussed later in the chapter. As this data emphasises, the U.S. government’s decision to classify popcorn as an essential wartime crop increased its cultivation significantly.

With a steady and protected supply guaranteed, the popcorn industry turned its attention to promoting popcorn to American exhibitors. As demonstrated in the pages of *Boxoffice*, popcorn manufacturers and wholesale suppliers echoed much of the National Popcorn Association’s rhetoric (often verbatim) in their sales pitches to exhibitors. In an attempt to align popcorn with the American war effort, their advertising campaigns typically evoked two key areas: American patriotism and popcorn’s nutritional value. It is the former that was perhaps the most powerful advertising strategy at this time.

Wil-Kin, a wholesale supplier of movie-theatre equipment based in Charlotte, North Carolina, had begun to carry a line of popcorn-related supplies by the early 1940s. The company incorporated patriotic imagery and used appealing language in advertising for its

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<sup>537</sup> Smith, *Popped Culture*, 73.

<sup>538</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

popcorn seasoning, a product which itself had a highly evocative name: Victory Popcorn Seasoning. Victory embodied a powerful message, and aligned the product – and popcorn more generally – with the American war effort.<sup>539</sup> Since it had been deemed an essential wartime crop, this was a connection that the popcorn industry wanted to promote and reinforce. One advertisement for Victory from May 1942 included a line drawing of a submarine accompanied by the slogan: ‘FOR THE DEFENSE OF YOUR POPCORN PATRONS! USE VICTORY POPCORN SEASONING’.<sup>540</sup> The imagery and language used in this advertisement was highly charged, strongly suggesting the company’s patriotism. Wil-Kin was also keen to highlight that this specific popcorn seasoning did not violate any OAP restrictions: ‘MADE FROM PURE HYDROGENATED VEGETABLE OIL – DOES NOT CONTAIN INGREDIENTS NECESSARY FOR OUR WAR PROGRAM’.<sup>541</sup> As rationing and restrictions grew more severe and black markets emerged, this was an important point to emphasise.

In another advertisement from July 1942, Wil-kin used an image of Uncle Sam to market Victory.<sup>542</sup> Heavily utilised in advertising during World War II, Uncle Sam was a highly recognisable American symbol.<sup>543</sup> As Charles McGovern has argued in his history of American advertising:

He [Uncle Sam] always embodied public approval, and thus advertisers eagerly put him to work promoting products from typewriters to condensed

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<sup>539</sup> Wil-Kin’s decision to name the product ‘Victory’ may have also stemmed from wider OPA policy. In reaction to decreased quality and supply of groceries on the home front (for example, canned goods) in 1942, the U.S. government discussed replacing brand names and selling these goods under a generic standardised label, named ‘Victory’. While there is no solid archival evidence that proves that Wil-Kin named their product Victory because of this, it seems reasonable to suggest that it may have had some influence on their decision. Inger L. Stole, *Advertising at War: Business, Consumers, and Government in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 83-86.

<sup>540</sup> Wil-Kin, ‘Victory Popcorn Seasoning Advertisement’, *Boxoffice*, 40:25, May 9, 1942, 79.

<sup>541</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>542</sup> Wil-Kin, ‘Victory Popcorn Seasoning Advertisement’, *Boxoffice*, 41:7, July 4, 1942, 79.

<sup>543</sup> Hal Morgan, *Symbols of America* (New York: Viking, 1986), 20.

milk, radios, and breakfast cereals. Whether he appeared as an emblem of the government, a representative consumer, or a symbol of nationality, he conveyed widespread national acceptance and usually a broad hint of nationalist sentiment and official approval.<sup>544</sup>

Not only evoking Uncle Sam, itself inherently a highly charged patriotic image, the advertisement was also purposefully designed to replicate the famous and easily recognisable James Montgomery Flagg recruitment poster, used during World War I.<sup>545</sup> Uncle Sam is pictured pointing his finger at the reader, accompanied by an adapted version of Flagg's famous slogan: 'I WANT EVERY AMERICAN TO BE HEALTHY AND STRONG!'<sup>546</sup> Evoking the original recruitment poster, the advertisement adapted the message better to suit Wil-Kin's needs: to sell popcorn seasoning.

Wil-Kin was not the only popcorn company to utilise patriotic language and imagery in their advertising, Chas E. Darden & Co. also used it prolifically throughout the war years. Based in Dallas, Texas, Chas E. Darden & Co. was another manufacturer and wholesaler of popcorn supplies for the film exhibition industry. Unlike Wil-Kin, the company was not promoting any specific products, but rather popcorn more generally. Between 1943 and 1945, the company used several variations of advertisements, all intended to endorse popcorn as a patriotic (and as will be discussed, nutritious) food to the nation's exhibitors. Advertisements for the company came in many variations during this period but most contained the National Popcorn Association's tagline: 'Popcorn is a Fighting Food'.<sup>547</sup> Echoing the pamphlet, this

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<sup>544</sup> Charles F. McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 112.

<sup>545</sup> Morgan, *Symbols of America*, 21-22.

<sup>546</sup> Wil-Kin, 'Victory Popcorn Seasoning Advertisement', *Boxoffice*, 41:7, July 4, 1942, 79.

<sup>547</sup> Some variations of the company's advertising, once again echoing the National Popcorn Association pamphlet, included the addition that popcorn was also 'AN ESSENTIAL WARTIME FOOD'. For example, see: Chas. E. Darden & Co., 'Popcorn Advertisement', *Boxoffice*, 44:4, December 4, 1943, 93.

phrase is also effective because the language used is highly evocative. *Fighting* is a word clearly designed to align popcorn with the war effort and American patriotism. One advert from August 1943 used this tagline alongside a photograph of American service personnel (two males and a female, dressed respectively in the uniforms of the army, navy, and air force).<sup>548</sup> The association between this photograph and ‘fighting food’ is clearly drawing on American patriotism, and even the border of stars surrounding the advert could be regarded as a subtle reference to the country’s flag. The patriotic message was further heightened by a second phrase used within the advert: ‘U.S. Needs Us Strong’.<sup>549</sup> Positioned boldly underneath the photograph, this reinforces the nationalistic tone of the advertisement but, also, references the nutritional strength popcorn provided.

Patriotic messages were a key component of Chas E. Darden & Co.’s advertising campaign but, further reinforcing the National Popcorn Association’s message, the company was also keen to emphasise the food’s health benefits. One way in which this manifested itself is that the company promoted popcorn as beneficial for the country’s mental well-being. Once again, borrowing rhetoric from the National Popcorn Association’s pamphlet, one advertisement from October 1943 stated that: ‘POPCORN IS A MORALE BUILDER’.<sup>550</sup> This was a similar approach to that of Coca-Cola during World War II. Exempt from sugar rationing and allowed by the U.S. government to continue production in order to supply American troops, the company based much of its advertising at this time on promoting the drink as a much-needed taste of home.<sup>551</sup> Mark Weiner, who has written extensively on Coca-Cola during World War II, has described how for many American servicemen Coca-Cola became ‘a firm rock in a sea of cultural confusion, a morale-boosting token of a place that

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<sup>548</sup> Chas. E. Darden & Co., ‘Popcorn Advertisement’, *Boxoffice*, 43:15, August 21, 1943, 88.

<sup>549</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>550</sup> Chas. E. Darden & Co., ‘Popcorn Advertisement’, *Boxoffice*, 43:25, October 30, 1943, 101.

<sup>551</sup> Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of War: World War II and the Battle for Food* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 424.

seemed exceedingly remote.’<sup>552</sup> In a time of uncertainty and upheaval, it was hoped that Coca-Cola (and other familiar items, like Hershey chocolate) would act as a small comfort to American troops – consequently justifying the fact that these companies were allowed to continue production throughout the war years. By promoting popcorn as a morale booster for those on the home front, Chas E. Darden & Co. and the National Popcorn Association more generally were also attempting to associate this movie-time snack with patriotic sentiment.

Highlighting not only its popularity with the American public as an affordable snack, this advertising campaign also sought to imbue popcorn with a nationalistic history. Popcorn, it claimed, was a favourite food of the Pilgrims, making it a ‘Traditional American Food’.<sup>553</sup> As Smith has discussed, this claim is part of a wider American narrative perpetuated over the last two hundred years relating to the first Thanksgiving story, in which Native Americans gave the Pilgrim Fathers popcorn.<sup>554</sup> While other varieties of maize – specifically, Flint Corn – became a vital source of sustenance to the early European settlers, popcorn (either popped or raw) was, in reality, not featured in their diet.<sup>555</sup> Though not historically accurate, this was nevertheless an effective approach because it built upon a pre-existing narrative within society, aligning popcorn with a story well-known and well-loved by the American public. By doing so, they were hoping further to elevate popcorn’s status, making it a ‘national symbol’ in the same way that hamburgers, hot dogs, and Coca-Cola were.<sup>556</sup>

Complementary to ads associating popcorn with national history, an even more prolific number of advertisements from Chas E. Darden & Co. emphasised the high nutritional value that popcorn held. Between September and October 1943, there was a heavy

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<sup>552</sup> Mark Weiner, ‘Consumer Culture and Participatory Democracy: The Story of Coca-Cola During World War II’, in *Food in the USA: A Reader*, ed. Carole M. Counihan (New York: Routledge, 2002), 133.

<sup>553</sup> Chas. E. Darden & Co., ‘Popcorn Advertisement’, *Boxoffice*, 43:25, October 30, 1943, 101.

<sup>554</sup> Smith, *Popped Culture*, 3-5.

<sup>555</sup> Clampitt, *Midwest Maize*, 21, 113.

<sup>556</sup> Weiner, ‘Consumer Culture and Participatory Democracy’, 123.

concentration of advertisements in *Boxoffice* from the company. With several different variations, all were intended to promote popcorn as one of the most nutritional foods available on the American domestic market. Several of these advertisements made reference to the rationing that faced the American population, and how popcorn could fill this gap.<sup>557</sup> One example, from September 1943, claimed that in a time of shortages, the public needed foodstuffs that filled three key criteria: were ‘high in food energy units’, ‘supplement protein deficiencies’, and ‘help the body function properly’.<sup>558</sup> The last of these criteria became the subject of other adverts used by the company, which promoted popcorn as a good source of ‘roughage’ (fibre).<sup>559</sup> Reportedly lacking from many Americans’ diet, something that was only exacerbated during the war years, the advert includes a quotation, taken from a medical textbook and written by several leading doctors, commenting on the importance of fibre within an individual’s diet.<sup>560</sup> Popcorn was, unsurprisingly, the answer to all of these dietary requirements, according to the adverts.

The company also published several advertisements which compared popcorn’s nutritional value to other foodstuffs. Several simply listed the key foods that, according to data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, had less food energy units than popcorn. These included: cooked fish and meat, cheese, breads, and many fruit and vegetables.<sup>561</sup> One further example presented this data in a chart, breaking it down in a way that was visually impactful. It compared popped popcorn’s protein content (11.4 percent) with 38 other random foodstuffs covering a range of food groups (for example, sausages, boiled rice, and oatmeal), all of which had a significantly less protein content.<sup>562</sup>

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<sup>557</sup> Chas. E. Darden & Co., ‘Popcorn Advertisement’, *Boxoffice*, 43:17, September 4, 1943, 111.

<sup>558</sup> Chas. E. Darden & Co., ‘Popcorn Advertisement’, *Boxoffice*, 43:19, September 18, 1943, 87.

<sup>559</sup> Chas. E. Darden & Co., ‘Advertisement’, *Boxoffice*, 43:20, September 25, 1943, 89.

<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>561</sup> Chas. E. Darden & Co., ‘Popcorn Advertisement’, *Boxoffice*, 43:18, September 11, 1943, 83; Chas. E. Darden & Co., ‘Popcorn Advertisement’, *Boxoffice*, 43:21, October 2, 1943, 87.

<sup>562</sup> Chas. E. Darden & Co., ‘Popcorn Advertisement’, *Boxoffice*, 43:23, October 16, 1943, 95.

An attractive selling point, this echoed earlier rhetoric from the turn of the century in which popcorn was considered something of a health food. During the 1890s, there were some within American society (including the Kellogg family) who believed that popcorn was a healthy and nutritious food, especially when eaten as a breakfast cereal.<sup>563</sup> Cretors also emphasised popcorn's qualities as a health food in the company's sales catalogues during the 1920s.<sup>564</sup> While this fad fell out of use very quickly, since popcorn was first and foremost a snack for many, even in the 1930s, some scientists and doctors recognised it as a food high in fibre and, therefore, beneficial.<sup>565</sup>

The nutritional aspect was an important factor for the popcorn industry to emphasise during wartime. This was a period in which food supplies on the American home front were restricted and, as Chas E. Darden & Co.'s advertising demonstrated, popcorn was a fairly healthy food. There were no illusions, however, on the part of the National Popcorn Association that popcorn in the 1940s was used for any other purpose than as a movie-time treat. It was not suggested, for example, that it become an alternative breakfast cereal for the masses. This pro-popcorn rhetoric interacted with another development occurring within the movie-theatre at this time, as popcorn was not the only concession stand refreshment that was touted as having great nutritional benefit. From 1942, there was a trend to incorporate milk bars within the concession stand.<sup>566</sup> Paramount's Chateau Theatre in Rochester, Minnesota, for example, opened a 'Milk and Health Bar' in March of that year.<sup>567</sup> A seated bar area, with illuminated candy display cases incorporated, movie-goers could stop for a milk-shake or glass of milk before or after a film. A source of calcium, milk was promoted by exhibitors as

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<sup>563</sup> Smith, *Popped Culture*, 36.

<sup>564</sup> C. Cretors & Co., 'Popping Facts', *Cretors Sales Catalog 3* (Chicago: Illinois, 1925), 4.

<sup>565</sup> Smith, *Popped Culture*, 37.

<sup>566</sup> Anon., 'Many New Items Added', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 146:6, February 7, 1942, 4; Anon., 'An Architect Looks at Trends in the Theatre', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 41:1, May 23, 1942, 57.

<sup>567</sup> Anon., 'Crowds Confirm Popularity of a Milk Bar', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 40:19, March 28, 1942, 47.

another healthy refreshment to be enjoyed at the movie-theatre. There was some truth to these health claims but this trend was mainly prompted by exhibitors – primarily larger studio-owned and affiliated exhibition chains – that had recently installed soda bars in the months preceding World War II. A costly investment, their supply of soda had been drastically diminished as a result of the war and OPA rationing. A nutritious alternative, milk was readily available within the home front domestic market.

Borrowing from the National Popcorn Association, popcorn suppliers and wholesalers were selling popcorn as a patriotic and healthy food to the nation’s exhibitors, who could then in turn use these selling points to promote the snack to movie-goers. It was a message that evidently worked because, as Clampitt has described, during the war years ‘Americans consumed three times the popcorn they had previously.’<sup>568</sup> The popcorn industry was fortunate in that it had the government’s support to continue despite the war, yet this period was still not entirely smooth sailing for the burgeoning industry. There were a number of obstacles that popcorn manufacturers, suppliers, and exhibitors would have to overcome. The primary problem was that, while the government allowed the continued cultivation of popcorn, adverse weather conditions blighted popcorn growth and supply intermittently throughout the war years. A particularly bad harvest period occurred between 1943 and 1944, with cultivation in several key states severely impacted both by droughts and flooding.<sup>569</sup> This is reflected in the decreased yield during 1943, seen in Figure 5. While nothing could be done to prevent bad weather conditions, it was a continuing problem for the popcorn industry. Having established a firm place within the movie-theatre from 1940, by 1944 it was becoming increasingly difficult for exhibitors to feed America’s popcorn habit.

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<sup>568</sup> Clampitt, *Midwest Maize*, 118.

<sup>569</sup> Anon., ‘Drought Victim’, *Motion Picture Herald*, 157:1, September 30, 1944, 8.

Inclement weather had a significant impact on popcorn yields in the latter years of the war, but shortages were worsened by OPA intervention. With demand at an all-time high and supplies running low, the OPA decided to step in in the hopes of regulating the industry – a decision that was not happily received by farmers. *Motion Picture Herald* best captured the state of the popcorn market in March 1944, describing the stalemate occurring between the OPA and Midwestern popcorn farmers:

Out in the Mid-West where tall sales in popcorn grow ... in two Iowa sections alone some 30 million pounds of the little yellow stuff lies untouched as farmers protest the \$3.68 OPA ceiling price, the problem is anything but corny. In 1942 farmers got as high as \$7.75 a hundred for their corn-on-the-cob crop, and then on December 24, 1943, the ceiling price went into effect.<sup>570</sup>

The OPA's setting of a ceiling price was intended better to regulate the market but, as *Motion Picture Herald* explained, this action only served to anger popcorn farmers. Already in many popcorn-producing states farmers' harvests were being negatively impacted by weather, and with the 1944 ceiling prices they were set to make even less profits from what they did produce. This set in motion a domino effect. The reduced popcorn yield meant that popcorn manufacturers and wholesale companies (who supplied movie-theatres with the whole popcorn operation: popcorn machines, raw popcorn, seasoning, boxes and cartons) had reduced reserves to draw upon.<sup>571</sup> A consequence of this was that their sale prices for exhibitors increased. This in turn had a knock-on effect for movie-theatres with popcorn in short supply and expensive to purchase, resulting in a 'popcorn dearth' across the country as a whole.<sup>572</sup>

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<sup>570</sup> Anon., 'Corn Problem', *Motion Picture Herald*, 154:12, March 18, 1944, 9.

<sup>571</sup> Anon., 'Popcorn Dearth Worries Texas Exhibs.; Profits Hit', *The Film Daily*, 85:34, February 17, 1944, 6.

<sup>572</sup> *Ibid.*; Phil M. Daly, 'Cuff Notes', *The Film Daily*, 85:74, April 14, 1944, 6.

The situation was worsened by the fact that, by 1944, popcorn had become an integral component of many movie-theatre profits. As early as 1940, some independent exhibitors were adamant that, without popcorn sales, they would have been operating at a loss and, by 1944, this was a sentiment that a greater number of exhibitors echoed – both independents and those belonging to major circuits.<sup>573</sup> In interviews with exhibitors discussing the 1944 popcorn ceiling prices, it is apparent that many considered the current conditions troublesome. Commenting on the realities of the situation for independent exhibitors in small town areas, Edward Clark, the manager of a movie-theatre in Metropolis, Illinois, was quoted as saying:

Small town theatres consider the popcorn veritable financial pillarettes on which their edifices of entertainment stand firm ... Popcorn, when the smart dialogue and harrowing plots fail, fills the box office breach. Popcorn pays the bills that come regularly every week. It spells the difference between profit and loss.<sup>574</sup>

Popcorn was by this stage widely seen as a supporting pillar that, regardless of the quality or popularity of the films on show, could always be relied upon to bring a steady and reliable source of income.

One example of the profitability of popcorn from this period comes from Connecticut. Popcorn was slow to enter New England but, by 1945, a third of the state's 150 movie-theatres had a popcorn machine installed, and that year Connecticut cinemas made an annual profit of \$500,000 from popcorn sales alone.<sup>575</sup> As this example shows, popcorn was a profitable enterprise and by the closing months of the war had become an integral aspect of

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<sup>573</sup> Anon., 'New Trust Move Against Majors, As Crescent Battle Continues', *Motion Picture Herald*, 144:9, August 30, 1941, 46.

<sup>574</sup> Anon., 'Corn Problem', *Motion Picture Herald*, 154:12, March 18, 1944, 9.

<sup>575</sup> Anon., 'Popcorn Machines in Third of Conn. Houses', *The Film Daily*, 88:9, July 13, 1945, 13.

movie-theatre operation. This change is underlined further by the emergence of a black-market popcorn industry, particularly prevalent in the years 1944/45 as a direct reaction to the sudden shortage in supply and high prices.<sup>576</sup> Conditions may have been bad but these circumstances (and exhibitors' responses to them) are a good indicator of just how important popcorn had become to American film exhibition. It was sales of popcorn that, for many exhibitors, was a critical factor in keeping their movie-theatres in the black.

Popcorn shortages intermittently plagued the war years, but it was not the only hurdle exhibitors and the popcorn industry had to overcome. Just because the cultivation of popcorn was not subject to rationing or restrictions, this protection did not extend to all aspects of the popcorn process. Popping oil, for instance, was one area that continued to cause problems during the war years. Exhibitors had favoured coconut oil in the years preceding the war, due to its ability to be kept hot for long periods without spoiling.<sup>577</sup> Imported from the Philippines, the supply of this particular oil was quickly ended after the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 and alternatives had to be sought. As Smith has described, exhibitors and the wider popcorn industry began feverishly to seek an alternative: 'Shortening, lard, beef fat, and soybean oil proved unsuccessful.'<sup>578</sup> Poor substitutes, all proved ineffective and failed to produce the quality of popcorn that exhibitors and audiences expected. Quickly rejected by many, those exhibitors that did persist with these options often faced scrutiny from the OPA – the meat fats being used were subject to rationing and usually could only be obtained in quantity on the black market.<sup>579</sup> To the relief of many exhibitors, suitable alternatives to

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<sup>576</sup> Anon., 'No Black Market Popcorn', *The Film Daily*, 85:89, May 5, 1944, 2; Anon., 'Black Market Corn', *Motion Picture Herald*, 155:7, May 13, 1944, 8; Anon., 'Popcorn Black Market Fines', *The Film Daily*, 87:44, March 6, 1945, 8. For a general discussion of the black market which emerged in America during World War II, see: Lingeman, *Don't You Know There's a War On?*, 241-243, 267-270.

<sup>577</sup> Smith, *Popped Culture*, 109.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid.

<sup>579</sup> Anon., 'Theatrical Photog, Chi Hotel and Eatery Named in Suits by OPA', *Variety*, 158:13, June 6, 1945, 45.

coconut oil were eventually found in peanut oil and fortified vegetable oil. In mid-1943, for example, Chas E. Darden & Co. released Golden Crest, a popcorn seasoning made from hydrogenated vegetable oils.<sup>580</sup> Whilst adequate replacements, neither of these proved a perfect substitute for coconut oil and, to the relief of exhibitors, these were only temporary war measures.<sup>581</sup> The restoration of trade routes with the Philippines after the end of World War II meant coconut oil was once again reinstated as the preferred choice.<sup>582</sup>

A final challenge that exhibitors had to overcome in the years between 1942 and 1945 related to the availability of popcorn machines. In the months and years preceding the war, interest in popcorn machines had begun to increase, piqued by trade press publications. The pages of *The Modern Theatre* and *Better Theatre* were littered with advertisements, typically full- or half-page coloured adverts emphasising the potential gold mine that popcorn presented. Advertisements for Manley popcorn machines, a leader in the field, were prolific in the months preceding the attack on Pearl Harbour. Frequently featured in both publications, close analysis of the company's distinctive red and black advertising materials provides valuable insight into popcorn's position during this period.

One form that these advertisements took was in emphasising the sales potential of operating a Manley machine, specifically at this time the New Manley Lifetime Model Super-Electric Popcorn Machine. A prime example of this comes from September 1941. Not featuring discussion of any key features or functions of this particular model, the colourful advert instead highlighted the potential profits that exhibitors could reap. The title of this advert captures this thrust, proclaiming in large, bold lettering: 'Just like DOUBLING Your BOX OFFICE ATTENDANCE – by INCREASING YOUR NET REVENUE'.<sup>583</sup> This

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<sup>580</sup> Chas. E. Darden & Co., 'Golden Crest Advertisement', *Boxoffice*, 43:14, August 14, 1943, 115.

<sup>581</sup> Smith, *Popped Culture*, 109.

<sup>582</sup> C.F. Simonin's Sons, 'Seazo Advertisement', *Boxoffice*, 51:2, May 17, 1947, 50.

<sup>583</sup> Manley, 'Popcorn Machine Advertisement', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 144:12, September 20, 1941, 27.

advertisement had very little actual substance, just reiterating in the smaller text that a Manley popcorn machine guaranteed profits, citing one anonymous exhibitor's testament to support this claim. This template was regularly repeated by the company: images of the popcorn machine were typically accompanied by variations of the same sales spiel, emphasising popcorn's high profit margins, the guaranteed profitability of operating a machine, and references to the success being had by other exhibitors.

Other advertisement variations used by Manley at this time developed this use of testimonials further. A prime example of this comes from June 1941. It is comprised largely of real reviews from exhibitors drawn from many different states across America (not solely the Midwest), almost all commenting on the success they experienced by operating a Manley popcorn machine.<sup>584</sup> One exhibitor from Minnesota commented that 'Our machine of your make takes in about \$125 per month'. Another from Tennessee noted that 'The first 13 months our sales were \$1,382.95', and one exhibitor from New Mexico remarked that the popcorn machine had single-handedly paid for the movie-theatre rent and staff wages.<sup>585</sup> As discussed in chapter one, testimonials are a powerful and effective sales method. Potential customers, in this case exhibitors, were much more likely to be attracted by these positive reviews than any other sales spiel. They were highly persuasive, providing real-life examples from their peers. Manley was certainly not the only popcorn machine company advertising their wares at this time, but their advertising campaign in the years preceding 1942 was one of the most effective. Won over by this type of sales pitch, exhibitors – especially those in the Midwest and Southern states – had begun to install and integrate popcorn machines within their concession operations. These actions in 1940/41 were in hindsight fortuitous. This is because, while the demand for popcorn within American movie-theatres grew exponentially

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<sup>584</sup> Manley, 'Popcorn Machine Advertisement', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 39:5, June 21, 1941, 53.

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.*

in the years following 1942, the market for popcorn machines stagnated. Just as the WPB halted production of candy counters, popcorn machines were also deemed non-essential under directive L-65 and production was, therefore, curtailed.<sup>586</sup> Major popcorn machine manufacturers, such as Cretors and Star Manufacturing Company, stopped production and redirected their efforts towards producing goods for the war-effort.<sup>587</sup> Reporting on film exhibition equipment shortages in August 1941, *The Modern Theatre* commented that no new popcorn machines were in production, so when the remaining inventory was sold an alternative source would need to be found.<sup>588</sup> Having previously purchased new popcorn machines direct from the manufacturers, exhibitors had to look elsewhere.

One side-effect of this temporary production hiatus was the disappearance of the colourful company advertisements that had appeared in 1940/41, replaced instead by a proliferation of small adverts for second-hand or restored popcorn machines in the classified sections of trade press magazines.<sup>589</sup> Unable to purchase new models from reputable, respected companies, those exhibitors who had not got ahead of this curve in the years and months preceding American involvement in World War II, instead had to embrace the make-do-and-mend mentality that characterised the period.<sup>590</sup> Their need to cater to their audiences' movie-time appetite and bring in profit from popcorn meant they would take whatever was on offer. Yet this itself became increasingly difficult as specific components needed to repair

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<sup>586</sup> Hagle, *C. Cretors & Co.*, 109.

<sup>587</sup> Unlike its competitors, Manley was not forced to shut down production during the war years because, like Hershey and Mars, the company had won a contract with the American government to produce popcorn machines for American military bases. *Ibid.*, 111-112.

<sup>588</sup> Anon., 'The Material Supply Situation at the Moment', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 39:13, August 16, 1941, 65.

<sup>589</sup> Anon., 'Classified Advertising: Used Equipment', *Motion Picture Herald*, 156:3, July 15, 1944, 62.

<sup>590</sup> This was in-line with the wider government encouragement for home sustenance. Paul K. Conkin has discussed how Americans were encouraged to create 'victory gardens', and how housewives could earn extra sugar rations by canning. Paul K. Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm: The Transformation of American Agriculture since 1929* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 85.

older machines became near impossible to obtain. Popcorn kettles (the metal basket in which popcorn was popped), for example, were in very short supply by the summer of 1944.<sup>591</sup> It is a testament to just how successful popcorn had proven to be that, despite intermittent shortages and having to rely on sub-par equipment, exhibitors persisted with popcorn with great success. As the following section will discuss, their struggles would be rewarded as the market was flooded with new, modern machines in the immediate post-war years.

Though it did not represent smooth sailing in any sense, exhibitors were able to overcome the difficulties that popcorn posed during the war years and this aspect of American film exhibition flourished despite the wartime conditions. By 1946, popcorn had become a universal component of movie-theatres across America, no longer confined to specific regions. In the aftermath of World War II, audiences expected to be able to consume hot, buttered popcorn with their films and, despite the mess and odour it produced, exhibitors were happy to supply it. The typical price of a carton of popcorn by mid-1946 was 10 cents, from which exhibitors made 7 cents profit from each individual sale.<sup>592</sup> The sheer profitability of this new concession staple helped them overcome any earlier hesitation. The Durwood-Dubinsky exhibition chain operating throughout Missouri and Kansas, for instance, had reportedly made over \$85,000 in 1946 in popcorn sales alone.<sup>593</sup> Candy, especially as confectionary shortages continued to persist, simply could not match such profits. The war years allowed popcorn (and the slowly-growing popcorn industry) to prove its worth, becoming a pillar of support for many exhibitors during this tough period. Having established

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<sup>591</sup> Anon., 'WPB to Okay New Theatres Only If Real War Need and After Talks With Existing Operators; No Projectors', *Variety*, 155:7, July 26, 1944, 3; Anon., 'Exhibitors Win Fight On OCR Building Plan', *Motion Picture Herald*, 156:5, July 29, 1944, 42.

<sup>592</sup> George Schutz, 'Catering to America's New Popcorn Habit', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 163:1, April 6, 1946, 14.

<sup>593</sup> Anon., '3 Dubinsky Bros. Sue 4<sup>th</sup> for Equal Share In \$2,000,000 Circuit', *Variety*, 164:13, December 4, 1946, 24.

its position within the American movie-theatre, the stage was perfectly set for the popcorn industry to boom in the immediate post-war years – and it did.

### **Part III: From Side-line to Big Business, 1946-1948**

#### **‘Blood Transfusion to Exhibitors’: The Post-War Popcorn Boom<sup>594</sup>**

In the months following the official end of World War II in early September 1945, popcorn was thriving within American movie-theatres. Described by many exhibitors as ‘their most profitable side line’, by late 1945 it was clear that popcorn was not a passing fad.<sup>595</sup> Instead, as *Theatre Catalog* commented: ‘Popcorn eating is here to stay – and, incidentally, it is as distinctly American as the hot dog.’<sup>596</sup> Voted the nation’s favourite movie-time snack in opinion polls and boasting impressive profit margins, popcorn emerged from the war years as the new king of the concession stand.<sup>597</sup> This was a position that was further cemented in the immediate post-war period, when the American market was flooded with an assortment of popcorn-related equipment and accessories. The most important of these was the influx of new and modern popcorn machines, available from mid-1946, which was a godsend for exhibitors who had been relying on old and outdated equipment.

WPB restrictions may have halted popcorn machine production during the war, but it did not deter several of the major manufacturers from designing their future models. Forward planning, vocally encouraged by *The Modern Theatre* towards all aspects of film exhibition supplies, was essential. It meant that as soon as restrictions were lifted, manufacturers could

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<sup>594</sup> Anon., ‘Mass Popcorn Sales Promoted Thru NTS’, *The Film Daily: Equipment News*, 90:126, November 29, 1946, 4.

<sup>595</sup> Anon., ‘Popcorn as Adjunct to Theatre Operation’, *Theatre Catalog, 1945* (Philadelphia: Jay Emanuel Publications, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition), 522.

<sup>596</sup> Ibid.

<sup>597</sup> Sherwin Kane, ‘Tradewise... By Sherwin Kane’, *Motion Picture Daily*, 59:25, February 5, 1946, 2.

immediately start production, and exhibitors could access goods quicker.<sup>598</sup> In line with this advice, Cretors, Manley, and the National Theatre Supply all teased exhibitors with details of their post-war popcorn machine models from spring of 1945 until their official release in mid-1946.

The National Theatre Supply was the first to make an announcement in April 1945, when it publicised the fact that the Star Manufacturing Company (a popcorn machine manufacturer producing exclusively for the supply company) was in the process of designing a new model. Not simply a new version of a pre-existing model, the design was being carefully planned so that it was fully tailored to deal with the specific needs of the movie-theatre: ease of operation, sleek design, and an ability to handle large crowds were deemed its key qualities.<sup>599</sup> In pre-production since 1943, the Star Manufacturing Company had been experimenting with various different functions and mechanisms in an attempt to design the most effective popcorn machine possible.<sup>600</sup> Every element of the new Star model, named the Super-Star, was geared towards efficiency and ease of operation. This motivation is evident in several of the machine's key functions. It was on wheels and so could easily be moved, and its parts and components were easy to take apart, which helped with machine maintenance and cleaning. The company offered exhibitors an optional addition, an automatic corn and oil feed. This was a mechanism which ensured that the correct amount of oil and corn were simultaneously fed into the kettle, helping to minimise wastage.<sup>601</sup>

Advertisements for the Super-Star model emphasised these new functions, its larger popping

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<sup>598</sup> Anon., 'An Annual Exhibition of Theatre Equipment Planned', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 47:19, September 15, 1945, 18.

<sup>599</sup> Anon., 'Theatre Model Popcorn Machine', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 159:1, April 7, 1945, 4.

<sup>600</sup> Anon., 'Star Popcorn Machines To Be Available Soon', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 48:4, December 8, 1945, 22.

<sup>601</sup> Anon., 'New Theatre Popcorn Machines', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 161:10, December 8, 1945, 4, 6.

and storage capacity, ease of cleaning, and sleek stainless-steel design, all attractive selling points for drawing the interest of exhibitors.<sup>602</sup>

It was not just popcorn machines manufactured by the Star Manufacturing Company that underwent an overhaul, but also those of its main competitors too. In the months preceding its release date of September 1946, Cretors teased details of their own new model, the Super Sixty Model. Utilising full-page colour advertisements, the company detailed the ten 'streamlined features' intended to make their machine the most desirable model on the market.<sup>603</sup> Attractive design, thermostatic control, and greater storage and popping capacity, were all key features, although Cretors did offer an additional feature: a filtered exhaust system.<sup>604</sup> Prior to its release in September 1946, an article explained this unique feature in further detail: the exhaust acted as a 'filtering device which is said to eliminate 80 per cent of the odor from the seasoning.'<sup>605</sup> This feature is significant because it shows one way in which Cretors was adapting its machines better to suit exhibitors. This particular feature tackled the unpleasant odour that came as a by-product of the popping process, a problem that had deterred some exhibitors from operating machines in previous decades. Unlike earlier popcorn machines which were simply designed just to pop popcorn, new models, like the new Super-Star and the Super Sixty, were carefully designed with exhibitors' needs in mind. An important but subtle shift, this was very clearly reflected in popcorn machine advertising in the immediate post-war years. Rather than foregrounding the profitability of these machines and a heavy use of eye-catching and attractive sales spiel, post-war advertising instead turned its attention to discussion of the qualities of the machine itself.

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<sup>602</sup> National Theatre Supply, 'Super-Star Popcorn Machine Advertisement', *The Film Daily*, 88:123, December 28, 1945, 20.

<sup>603</sup> C. Cretors & Co., 'Popcorn Machine Advertisement', *Motion Picture Herald*, 160:12, September 22, 1945, 71.

<sup>604</sup> Ibid.

<sup>605</sup> Anon., 'About the Trade', *The Film Daily*, 90:49, September 9, 1946, 10.

Advertisements for Manley's new, state-of-the-art post-war model also spotlighted the machine's key features, often in great detail. One example from October 1946 provides a prime example of this. Using a more realistic image of the popcorn machine than earlier examples, exhibitors were provided with an in-depth explanation of the machine's key functions, explaining what they were, what they did, and why this was necessary. Explaining the design of the popcorn kettle, for instance, Manley described and explained how it had been improved: 'The special double-sealed element, for example, gives *double* protection against burn-outs and oxidation ... better and more effective and efficient heating, hence greater expansion of the corn.'<sup>606</sup> It is important to highlight this new feature of the advertising because it shows that Manley was encouraging exhibitors to know more about the functionality of their popcorn machines.<sup>607</sup> This paralleled the wider trend within the concession industry and trade press at this time, which encouraged greater analysis of refreshment sales in order to maximise the concession stand's efficiency, and subsequent, profits.

This evident shift in advertising was also a product of a changed market. In the years before World War II, popcorn was on the periphery. Popular in some regions, it did not yet have widespread popularity or presence within American movie-theatres. At this time, therefore, Manley's advertisements were not selling popcorn machines to exhibitors but, instead, popcorn more generally. Impressive profit margins and the ease of operation were attractive sales points, which is why they played such a prominent part in pre-war advertising. By 1946, however, popcorn was mainstream and new machines in high demand. The company no longer needed to sell exhibitors on popcorn, and could instead focus on selling

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<sup>606</sup> Manley, 'Popcorn Machine Advertisement', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 165:3, October 19, 1946, 5.

<sup>607</sup> Manley, 'Popcorn Machine Advertisement', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 161:6, November 10, 1945, 11; Manley, 'Popcorn Machine Advertisement', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 166:2, January 11, 1947, 7.

their actual popcorn machine. A subtle but significant shift, analysis of Manley's advertising across this period – in the months and years before and after World War II – provides yet another example of how popcorn's position within the film exhibition industry changed during this period.

Planned, trialled, and heavily promoted throughout 1945 and early 1946, it was not until the summer of that year that these new popcorn machines finally hit the American market. WPB restrictions on popcorn machine manufacture (and other film exhibition equipment more generally) were lifted from May 1946, enabling manufacturers immediately to restart production, with new goods finally entering the market that summer.<sup>608</sup> A two-page advertisement in *The Modern Theatre* heralded Manley's new popcorn machine that was available for exhibitors to view from May 1, 1946, and to purchase in the subsequent months.<sup>609</sup> Despite the poor popcorn yield in 1947 caused by bad weather conditions, demand for post-war popcorn machines was high.<sup>610</sup> Some manufacturers, notably Cretors, struggled to keep up with demand, hindered by persistent shortages in some of the materials and parts (steel and motors, for example) required for popcorn machines.<sup>611</sup> The release of these new machines was a critical moment in popcorn's developing relationship with the movie-theatre. Exhibitors had made do during the war years, but modern models were required to elevate popcorn further. It was not the only development, however. Popcorn, estimated to represent a hundred million-dollar-industry by 1947, involved a lot more than just popcorn machines.<sup>612</sup> At its peak in the immediate post-war years, a complete infrastructure and complex network

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<sup>608</sup> Anon., 'Flow of Equipment To Albany Starts', *The Film Daily*, 90:19, July 26, 1946, 5.

<sup>609</sup> Manley, 'Popcorn Machine Advertisement', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 48:25, April 27, 1946, 22-23.

<sup>610</sup> Anon. 'Corn Production Down for Year', *Motion Picture Herald*, 169:13, December 27, 1947, 59; Anon., 'About the Trade', *The Film Daily*, 90:29, August 9, 1946, 9.

<sup>611</sup> Hagle, *C. Cretors & Co. 125 Years*, 120.

<sup>612</sup> Anon., 'Popcorn', *Motion Picture Herald*, 169:13, December 27, 1947, 53.

of manufacturers, suppliers, and products had emerged to support and further cement the food's dominance over the concession stand.

As the film exhibition industry emerged from the war years, there was an increasing awareness that the concession stand, in particular its new addition, popcorn, was an area of film exhibition that had not yet been developed to its full potential. In the immediate post-war years, numerous conventions, of both exhibitors and the popcorn industry, highlighted popcorn (and the concession stand more generally) as an important area of interest. At the annual convention of the Kansas Missouri Theatre Association, held in Kansas City, Missouri, in October 1947, popcorn was the hot topic of discussion. Exhibitors discussed new popcorn machines and the poor crop conditions (raising concern about the knock-on effect that this would have on popcorn prices), but also revealed their own experiences of selling popcorn: one exhibitor present admitted that his movie-theatre made \$1,800 a month from popcorn alone.<sup>613</sup> Popcorn also played a prominent role at the Allied States convention held in Milwaukee in December 1947. Not only an important topic of discussion for the exhibitors present, it was popcorn machines and concession counters, rather than projectors, that was the most expensive exhibition equipment on display at the convention.<sup>614</sup> Popcorn had become a key concern of the film exhibition industry by this period, a significant shift from previous decades when the concession stand was something of an afterthought for many. Exhibitors' heightened interest in this area encouraged the wider popcorn industry to invest increasing attention in popcorn, leading to greater experimentation in how to develop this angle of film exhibition and new technological developments.

Popcorn harvests grew significantly during the war years. Exhibitors' reliance on the profits taken from popcorn sales only grew as the period progressed, making the need for a

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<sup>613</sup> Anon., 'Behind Doors at KMTA – from High Prices to High Popcorn', *Motion Picture Herald*, 169:2, October 11, 1947, 27.

<sup>614</sup> Anon., 'Popcorn Heads Show', *Variety*, 169:1, December 10, 1947, 10.

stable and secure supply of popcorn a necessity. One way in which the popcorn industry hoped to improve this supply was through the creation of new hybrid popcorn variations. In the immediate post-war years, popcorn processors and suppliers began to fund research into this.<sup>615</sup> Colleges and universities in the Midwest, including Purdue University in Indiana, were at the forefront of this research which was tasked with creating new hybrid varieties of popcorn that were genetically engineered to improve popping expansion and higher yields.<sup>616</sup>

Iowa State College, another college engaged in such research, developed a new hybrid variety which was ‘almost-crunchless’ and popped ‘in a butterfly shape and thus takes up more space in the bag or box.’<sup>617</sup> These were both attractive traits for exhibitors: crunchless popcorn had the potential to combat complaints from some concession stand critics regarding noise, and bigger, fluffier popcorn meant that less popcorn was needed to fill popcorn cartons, potentially saving exhibitors money in the long term. Other research, experimenting with a combination of white and yellow popcorn varieties, produced a new popcorn strain that had a much higher popcorn yield and helped to eliminate kernels (the hard, un-popped popcorn shells) from the popping process.<sup>618</sup> Hybrid varieties of this nature were shown to increase profits significantly. In Sioux City, Indiana, for example, movie-theatres reported that, by using a hybrid variety, their popcorn yield increased by between 30 and 50 percent and, subsequently, their profits increased by as much as 30 percent.<sup>619</sup> Just as greater analysis of the exhibitors’ needs had helped to overhaul the post-war popcorn machines, this type of

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<sup>615</sup> Anon., ‘About the Trade’, *The Film Daily*, 88:95, November 16, 1945, 7.

<sup>616</sup> Smith, *Popped Culture*, 107-108; Anon., ‘About the Trade’, *The Film Daily*, 92:114, December 12, 1947, 6; Anon., ‘Profs Show Poppers What College Can Do’, *The Film Daily: Equipment News*, 92:61, September 25, 1947, 1.

<sup>617</sup> Phil M. Daly, ‘Ringing Down the News Week’s Curtain’, *The Film Daily*, 93:28, February 13, 1948, 4.

<sup>618</sup> Anon., ‘Popcorn Curing Process Increases Pop-ability’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 50:21, March 29, 1947, 41.

<sup>619</sup> Anon., ‘New Popcorn Strain Ups Profits More Than 30%’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 50:13, February 1, 1947, 38.

research was important because it improved the quality of the popcorn available on the market.

This period also saw advances in other popcorn-related supplies, specifically cartons and boxes. Despite popcorn's popularity with the vast majority of movie-goers, there was a very small yet vocal minority who opposed the presence of food at all within the movie-theatre auditorium, with their complaints centred around the noise.<sup>620</sup> Engineering popcorn to be crunch-less was one way to combat this, but so too was the development of silent popcorn boxes.<sup>621</sup> Previously popcorn had come in paper bags which were prone to rustle. In contrast, silent boxes were made of more rigid cardboard, eliminating some of the noise problems. Fox West Coast was one of the first major exhibition chains to invest in this new product, as it was hoped that these new cartons would 'obliterate the nuisance of crackling paper bags.'<sup>622</sup> Despite the higher cost to exhibitors, the chain felt that this was a necessary expense. Initially introduced in January 1948, by March the exhibition chain was reporting that popcorn sales were up 20 percent.<sup>623</sup> *Variety* noted that the shift to silent boxes not only helped to reduce rustling noise, but also encouraged those who had previously shied away from purchasing popcorn because of fears of disturbing others, to begin buying the product.<sup>624</sup> Examples like this demonstrated how a simple change could have a very large impact on profits, and in the years following 1947 had become the norm.

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<sup>620</sup> From the trade press, it is clear that there was a slight resurgence in opposition to the movie-theatre concession stand at this time. In 1947, Loew's, a major national exhibition chain, went against the norm and banned the sale and consumption of refreshments within their holdings. In that year, there were also failed bills in both Oregon and Wisconsin to have popcorn banned from movie-theatres. Anon., 'Exhibits' Ban on Noisy Munch-Crunch Gets Top Results', *Variety*, 165:11, February 19, 1947, 21; Anon., 'St Loo Popcorn Pop-Off', *Variety*, 165:12, February 26, 1947, 22; Anon., 'Wisconsin Bill Would Bar Candy Sales in Theaters', *The Film Daily*, 91:83, April 29, 1947, 2; Anon., 'Wis. Theater Candy Sale Ban Rejected', *The Film Daily*, 91:109, June 5, 1947, 1; Smith, *Popped Culture*, 103.

<sup>621</sup> Anon., 'About the Trade', *The Film Daily: Equipment News*, 92:67, October 3, 1947, 6; Phil M. Daly, 'Ringling Down the Week's Curtain', *The Film Daily*, 92:81, October 24, 1947, 3.

<sup>622</sup> Anon., 'FWC's Anti-Noise Drive', *Variety*, 169:8, January 28, 1948, 25.

<sup>623</sup> Anon., 'Popcorn Silencers', *Variety*, 170:2, March 17, 1948, 22.

<sup>624</sup> *Ibid.*

The developments discussed here all, in some way, were designed to develop the popcorn industry and expand its dominant position within American movie-theatres following World War II. Designed to improve efficiency, profits, or solve problems that had long plagued the snack, popcorn manufacturers and suppliers devoted significant attention to strengthening popcorn's position even further. As a result, the popcorn industry itself grew. Manley, for example, which had originally just manufactured popcorn machines, was offering a complete popcorn line by 1947 including popcorn machines, new hybrid popcorn varieties, seasonings, salts, and popcorn boxes.<sup>625</sup> It is unsurprising that Manley would expand in this way: it is another example of how this aspect of film exhibition was being simplified for exhibitors. They were now able to purchase everything that they needed in one place, from a reputable brand that they could trust and rely upon. Manley even created a series of short trailers that exhibitors could use to advertise popcorn and the concession stand, to help boost intermission sales.<sup>626</sup>

Having shaken off the unsavoury associations and stigma of earlier decades, popcorn had been able to establish itself in a position of importance during World War II. It was the post-war years, however, that cemented this dominance. *Variety*, decades earlier a staunch critic of food within the movie-theatre, praised popcorn's success in an article published in early 1949. The article described how the Alliance theatre chain, operating over 80 movie-theatres throughout the Midwest, had made over one-third of its net income in 1948 from popcorn sales, a situation which it commented was not uncommon.<sup>627</sup> At a convention of exhibitors in September 1947, one machine supplier reported that: 'of a net profit of \$30,000 shown by three small and average-sized theaters. Only \$10,000 came from the box office

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<sup>625</sup> Manley, 'Popcorn Supplies Advertisement', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 167:1, April 5, 1947, 5; National Theatre Supply, 'Popcorn Supplies Advertisement', *The Film Daily: Equipment News*, 91:115, June 13, 1947, 5.

<sup>626</sup> Phil M. Daly, 'Mid-week Murmurings', *The Film Daily*, 94:24, August 4, 1948, 4.

<sup>627</sup> Anon., 'Popcorn Saluted', *Variety*, 173:5, January 12, 1949, 9.

with \$20,000 coming from popcorn sales.<sup>628</sup> In many movie-theatres, at all levels and in all locales, popcorn often meant the difference between a movie-theatre's profit and loss, and kept many in the black.<sup>629</sup> By this point, nobody could deny popcorn's profitability. Even Loew's, which had been staunchly opposed to refreshments, had begun to sell popcorn within its movie-theatres by August 1949, and was immediately reaping the benefits. An estimated 40 percent of the chain's profits came from concession sales.<sup>630</sup>

No longer a perfunctory side-line, by the latter years of the 1940s popcorn had become big business. As this chapter has analysed, it was the specific conditions of World War II that helped to contribute to this, accelerating a process that might have taken longer if left to develop organically. Described by National Theatre Supply as a 'blood transfusion to exhibitors', it is important also to recognise how popcorn breathed new life and energy into the movie-theatre concession stand.<sup>631</sup> Commanding greater respect and attention within the film exhibition industry, popcorn's success had a knock-on effect on the wider concession stand, as the remainder of this chapter will discuss.

### **'Coca-Cola = Profit': Expansion in the Concession Stand<sup>632</sup>**

Helen Kent, a prolific contributor to *The Modern Theatre*, described popcorn as the 'nucleus' of the concession stand in December 1947.<sup>633</sup> By this, she meant that in the immediate post war period, the rapid growth and development within the movie-theatre concession was a by-

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<sup>628</sup> Anon., 'Report Popcorn Stands Bring Two-thirds of "Take"', *The Film Daily*, 92:62, September 26, 1947, 5.

<sup>629</sup> Anon., 'Mankiewicz Popped Off Something With Those Popcorn Cracks in "Life"', *Variety*, 175:5, July 27, 1949, 9.

<sup>630</sup> Anon., 'Indpls. B. O. Slides 30% But Pickup Due in Fall', *Variety*, 175:11, August 24, 1949, 27.

<sup>631</sup> Anon., 'Mass Popcorn Sales Promoted Thru NTS', *The Film Daily: Equipment News*, 90:126, November 29, 1946, 4.

<sup>632</sup> Coca-Cola, 'Coca-Cola Advertisement', *Motion Picture Herald*, 173:6, November 6, 1948, 44.

<sup>633</sup> Helen Kent, 'Confection Vending: Important Side-line of Showmanship', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 52:5, December 6, 1947, 15.

product of popcorn's meteoric rise and success. The film industry was taking this aspect of film exhibition much more seriously as a result of popcorn's proven profitability, which in turn led to greater interest in the concession stand as a whole. It is developments in these other areas that the remainder of this chapter will discuss, because it is important to recognise that popcorn was still just one part of the concession stand menu.

One action that many exhibitors took in the months and years following World War II was to remodel and modernise the physical space of their movie-theatres. This was a natural step for exhibitors to take since during the war years WPB restrictions on building works and a lack of materials and equipment had made it near-impossible for exhibitors to undertake modernisation work. Emerging from the war years, many movie-theatres looked tired, and in need of sprucing up. New seating, air-conditioning units, and projectors were all areas that exhibitors were investing in, but the concession stand – more than it had ever previously been – was a crucial component of renovation plans at this time. An influx of new machines and the lifting of WPB restrictions meant that exhibitors were able to transform their concession stands into state-of-the-art operations. This process was aided by the government's introduction of the Civilian Production Administration (CPA) grant scheme in mid-1946. Not intended to finance complete building projects or extensive structural alterations (for example, installation of new flooring), the CPA was available to exhibitors wanting to buy and install new equipment, notably air-conditioning, candy counters, and popcorn machines.<sup>634</sup> With new machines readily available on the market, and financial support available, the concession stand was once again in a strong position.

By 1946, both exhibitors and the trade press were aware of the importance of the concession stand. Viewed as an important source of profit, much greater emphasis was placed

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<sup>634</sup> Anon., 'CPA Crackdown Not Hitting Theatres Too Severely This Summer', *Variety*, 162:13, June 5, 1946, 29.

on proper planning and layout. Articles providing in-depth analysis of its prime location, appearance, and efficiency grew in volume during this period in the pages of *The Modern Theatre*. One frequent piece of advice offered to exhibitors was that commercial success depended on ensuring the highest footfall possible past the concession stand. A location in the centre of the lobby, close to the ticket booth, was deemed the most desirable.<sup>635</sup> Charles G. Manley, President of Manley, not only sold a complete line of popcorn-related products, he regularly contributed articles to *The Modern Theatre* in the post-war years.<sup>636</sup> Manley presented his philosophy for concession stand success as the ‘3 M’s’ (merchandising, machines, and methods).<sup>637</sup> Encouraging the idea of impulse purchase, he suggested exhibitors should build upon the showmanship of popcorn merchandising: ‘There must be *action*, and there must be *beauty*, and as many of his senses as possible should be acted upon.’<sup>638</sup> The attractiveness of Manley’s post-war machines themselves, as well as the aroma of fresh popcorn and sight of it popping, were all tools that could be used to boost sales.<sup>639</sup>

Advice of this type encouraged exhibitors to analyse their own refreshment operations closely, with their findings from this process integral to informing their individual concession remodelling plans. The Fox Theatre in Aurora, Colorado, a new build belonging to the Fox Intermountain chain, provides a strong example of the importance and results of proper planning.<sup>640</sup> Located in a prime position within the lobby, occupying the wall directly next to

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<sup>635</sup> Anon., ‘Manager Bill Powell Makes a Case for Candy Bar Sales’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 50:13, February 1, 1947, 26; Oscar Trudeau, ‘Some Rules of Conduct for Candy Vending in Theatres’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 51:3, May 24, 1947, 24.

<sup>636</sup> Not to be confused with Charles T. Manley, the previous President of Manley, who had died in January 1946.

<sup>637</sup> Outlined and discussed in articles, the ‘3 M’s’ were also regularly promoted in Manley’s advertising campaign from 1946, used to promote their popcorn line, specifically popcorn machines. Manley, ‘Popcorn Supplies Advertisement’, *Motion Picture Herald*, 173:6, November 6, 1948, 45.

<sup>638</sup> Charles G. Manley, ‘Popcorn Sales Resistance ... How to Turn it into Profit’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 49:15, August 17, 1946, 14.

<sup>639</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>640</sup> Anon., ‘Resourceful Planning Qualifies The Quonset Type of Theatre’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 50:9, January 4, 1947, 26-27, 34.

the entrance of the auditorium, the concession stand was in the most optimal position. Movie-goers had no choice but to pass by it, a design choice which effectively capitalised upon the impulse nature of concession purchases. Other design features were implemented to attract even greater attention: ‘... a large refreshment bar purveying candy, popcorn and ice cream sandwiches. This area is back-lighted by a reverse cove containing neon tubing’.<sup>641</sup> Lighting, as was used at the Fox Theatre, was an effective way of drawing greater attention to the concession stand – something that would be complemented in the following years by the increased use of neon lights within many concession-related machines. This new design feature was intended to boost a machine’s attractiveness and capture movie-goers’ attention.

Popcorn was the most successful new addition to the concession stand, but it was not the only new menu item. Soda dispensers, as previously discussed, had entered some movie-theatres in the months preceding World War II, a development that had been well-received by audiences. Halted by the war, the process of integrating soda into the concession stand became mainstream in the immediate post-war years.<sup>642</sup> This was a trend that exhibitors at all levels and locales needed to follow because, by 1946, American audiences clearly expected soda to be available.<sup>643</sup> Following the end of government restrictions (on both sugar and machines), exhibitors, with much fervour, once again turned their attention to this new addition. Extensive remodelling of the concession stand aided this process. Previously, it had been small beverage dispensers that had been incorporated into the pre-existing concession stand. These were not the most efficient pieces of equipment as they typically only filled a single cup at a time. The complete overhaul of the physical space of the concession stand

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<sup>641</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>642</sup> Soda dispensers were in short supply, and sugar rationing effected the availability of soda and soda syrups. Anon., ‘Automatic Drink Vending’, *Motion Picture Herald*, 169:9, November 29, 1947, 47.

<sup>643</sup> Ibid.

(and lobby area, more generally) meant that some exhibitors could incorporate much larger soda fountains into their refreshment operations.<sup>644</sup>

Edward Claughton, from Tampa, Florida, was one of the first exhibitors to install soda fountains within his four movie-theatres. Despite requiring a lot of lobby space, he believed that this was a positive addition:

... the fountain is one of the best features of the new house. By actual count one day it was discovered that eight out of every ten persons entering the lobby stopped at the fountain ... From a financial standpoint it is a good investment, and such service adds materially to the comfort of the patrons.<sup>645</sup>

Attractive and catering to a high volume of demand, this was a positive addition for exhibitors like Claughton. Dispensing ice-cold beverages, soda fountains also allowed exhibitors to experiment with offering ice cream. Despite not reaching its full potential till the 1950s, as will be discussed in chapter four, it is still a useful example of exhibitors trialling and expanding new concession items. Unlike popcorn and candy, which were permitted within the auditorium, in order to limit mess soda and ice cream were restricted to the concession stand area. Many exhibitors factored in a small bar area or seating booths into the redesign of their lobby space. This built upon the earlier attempts by some exhibitors, typically larger exhibition chains, to expand the social function of the movie-theatre within the community. Found to be most popular in the evening time, between 7pm and 9pm, the soda fountain was a place for people to relax and socialise.<sup>646</sup>

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<sup>644</sup> Anon., 'Soda Fountain Service for Thirsty Theatre Patrons', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 49:19, September 14, 1946, 30.

<sup>645</sup> Ibid.

<sup>646</sup> Ibid., 44.

Effective in larger movie-theatres or new builds, soda fountains were not well-suited to smaller venues. Requiring a lot of space and operating at a high volume, smaller movie-theatres did not have the need or ability to use this type of equipment. Audiences had come to expect soda by 1947, so rather than foregoing it, smaller movie-theatres looked to more manageable alternatives. Compact cup vendors which could dispense various flavours of soda or refrigerated units for storing bottles were the two leading methods, both of which could easily be incorporated into the pre-existing candy counter.<sup>647</sup> The merits of both were discussed and debated within a November 1946 issue of *Theatre Sales*. Cup vendors had a larger capacity, able to dispense up to 1,200 servings thereby requiring less maintenance, but had a higher cost price: ‘A gallon of Coca-Cola syrup today costs about \$1.70 and suffices for 128 drinks, and carbonation and cups add about ½ a cent to the cost of each drink.’<sup>648</sup> Bottle vending, in contrast, was often cheaper and more manageable – exhibitors simply needed to buy crates of pre-bottled soda and stock the vending machine or refrigerated display case.<sup>649</sup> Despite their respective pros and cons, both were valid and successful means of selling soda for smaller movie-theatres. With movie-goers paying on average 5 cents per drink in 1947, soda could reap substantial profits for an exhibitor: *Theatre Sales* (rebranded in October 1947, this was the new name for *Motion Picture Herald’s Better Theatres* segment) reported that one movie-theatre made a net profit of \$2,078.60 in 1946 from cup vending.<sup>650</sup>

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<sup>647</sup> Helen Kent, ‘Confection Vending: Important Side-line of Showmanship’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 52:5, December 6, 1947, 16.

<sup>648</sup> Cup dispensers required access to a movie-theatre’s water supply, the drinks it dispensed a mixture of soda syrup/flavourings and carbonated water. Anon., ‘Automatic Drink Vending’, *Motion Picture Herald*, 169:9, November 29, 1947, 47.

<sup>649</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>650</sup> With a weekly average of 5,600 admissions per week, the movie-theatre in *Theatre Sales* example, reported 1,400 drink sales per week (for every four tickets sold, one drink was brought). *Ibid.*

Not only were exhibitors keen to offer soda but, witnessing just how profitable the concession stand had become, major companies also wanted to enter the movie-theatre market, with the most notable name here being Coca-Cola. Like Hershey and Mars, the company had secured a contract with the American government which had enabled them to carry on production uninterrupted during the war years.<sup>651</sup> With Coke an American staple, they had kept the country's troops across the globe well-stocked with the nation's favourite drink. In the months following World War II, the movie-theatre piqued Coca-Cola's interest. The immense success being had at the concession stand appeared to the company to represent a relatively untapped market in regard to beverages: up until then, exhibitors had been largely using non-branded drinks and syrups. An added attraction for the company was the realisation that Coca-Cola perfectly paired with popcorn. Popcorn was at this time heavily salted, something that increased movie-goers' thirst.<sup>652</sup> The company hoped that by establishing itself within American movie-theatres, Coca-Cola – already a well-known and well-loved brand – would be in the perfect position to quench this thirst.

Unlike Manley, Coca-Cola did not contribute or sponsor any articles within trade press magazines advising exhibitors on beverage sales, but it did conduct an equally impressive advertising campaign. Throughout the immediate post-war years, Coca-Cola had a steady flood of full-page advertisements within *The Modern Theatre* and the *Theatre Sales*. Just as Manley's advertising came in two distinct phases, a similar pattern can be found in Coca-Cola's campaign – though, perhaps, not as clearly differentiated. The bulk of the beverage company's advertising came in the form of selling Coca-Cola to exhibitors: meaning emphasising the potential profits that the soda could bring. Echoing the bold and hyped sales spiel of pre-World War II popcorn machine adverts, Coca-Cola regularly

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<sup>651</sup> Weiner, 'Consumer Culture and Participatory Democracy', 127.

<sup>652</sup> Helen Kent, 'Confection Vending: Important Side-line of Showmanship', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 52:5, December 6, 1947, 15; Smith, *Popped Culture*, 122.

described the ease by which the drink would draw significant profits and success for exhibitors at all levels. Accompanying a photograph of movie-goers enjoying Coca-Cola at a busy concession stand in New Jersey, one example from December 1947, included the eye-catching slogan: 'SELLING COCA-COLA – A NEW SOURCE OF PROFITS IN THEATRES'.<sup>653</sup> This encapsulates the purpose of the advert, a message that was further reinforced by the small text occupying the bottom half of the page. Mentioning that the nation's 'biggest motion picture operations' were incorporating Coca-Cola within their concession stands, the advertisement encouraging exhibitors – at all levels – to consider ways in which Coca-Cola could be added to their own operations.<sup>654</sup>

Later advertisements from the company expanded upon this theme, emphasising that regardless of movie-theatre size there was a dispenser to suit all needs – as evidenced by one example from November 1948, which used the heading: 'IN EVERY TYPE OF THEATRE LOBBY SPACE + COCA-COLA = PROFIT'.<sup>655</sup> The small text of the advertisement provided greater detail about what this meant for different sized movie-theatres:

In the smaller theatres, a coin cooler or two may be most profitable. In the larger theatres, it's a question of the proper installation behind the counter. In all types of theatres, an appropriate Coca-Cola installation goes to work the day it is put in, turning space into money.<sup>656</sup>

This element of Coca-Cola's advertising was effective because it accounted for the diversity that existed within the American film exhibition industry. The photographs used in their advertising showed all kinds and sizes of movie-theatre where Coca-Cola was being successfully sold, from the renowned Roxy Theatre in New York to smaller enterprises, like

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<sup>653</sup> Coca-Cola, 'Coca-Cola Advertisement', *Motion Picture Herald*, 169:13, December 27, 1947, 52.

<sup>654</sup> Ibid.

<sup>655</sup> Coca-Cola, 'Coca-Cola Advertisement', *Motion Picture Herald*, 173:6, November 6, 1948, 44.

<sup>656</sup> Ibid.

the Eastwood Theatre in East Hartford, Connecticut.<sup>657</sup> The company's sales spiel, carefully crafted to hold universal appeal, persuasively sold Coca-Cola to exhibitors.

Just as Manley's advertisements had shifted from selling popcorn to popcorn machines, Coca-Cola's advertising campaign transitioned as well: from selling Coca-Cola the drink, to a variety of Coca-Cola dispensers. This new wave of advertising was targeted primarily at smaller movie-theatres, those with between 500 and 800 seats. Many of the adverts from late 1948 onwards promoted what Coca-Cola called a 'cooler', but was more akin to a vending machine. Not requiring an attendant or taking up valuable counter space, coolers were instead located in a space adjacent to the concession stand. These machines were self-service: exhibitors simply needed to ensure the cooler was well stocked with Coca-Cola bottles, and movie-goers were able to serve themselves by inserting a nickel into the machine.<sup>658</sup> According to the company, a movie-theatre of this size could expect to sell between 100 to 200 cases of Coca-Cola in a week, via a cooler, reaping substantial profits from very little effort.<sup>659</sup> Spotlighting small movie-theatres in this way was an effective strategy. It was much easier for large exhibition chains to make the decision to vend Coca-Cola, since they often had whole departments dedicated to managing the concession stand. The majority of movie-theatres, however, were not of this type. Much smaller, and typically independent, taking this type of risk was a big financial commitment.

Coca-Cola's advertisements, combined with the brand's strong presence and popularity within America, made a persuasive case for Coca-Cola's place within the movie-theatre – regardless of factors such as size or location. Coca-Cola had set out in the months following World War II to conquer the film exhibition industry. Its advertising was a huge

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<sup>657</sup> Coca-Cola, 'Coca-Cola Advertisement', *Motion Picture Herald*, 170:9, February 28, 1948, 48; Coca-Cola, 'Coca-Cola Advertisement', *Motion Picture Herald*, 172:3, July 17, 1948, 44.

<sup>658</sup> Coca-Cola, 'Coca-Cola Advertisement', *Motion Picture Herald*, 173:2, October 9, 1948, 52.

<sup>659</sup> Coca-Cola, 'Coca-Cola Advertisement', *Motion Picture Herald*, 171:12, June 19, 1948, 48.

component of this and, by 1950, the company had achieved its aim. By that year, Coca-Cola was available in the vast majority of American movie-theatres, only absent in the main from those that had adopted its main competitor Pepsi instead.<sup>660</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In the decades preceding World War II, movie-theatres had relied to boost their box-office income almost solely on the sale of confectionary items. Candy and chocolate goods had ruled supreme. Why look elsewhere when these items were so profitable? The conditions of World War II and life on the home front, however, finally challenged this. While exhibitors had been slowly beginning to experiment with new concession items in the years prior to the war, notably, popcorn and soda, the war accelerated this process. Popcorn's ascendancy within the nation's movie-theatres was no doubt aided by its impressive profit margin. With audiences, by the early 1940s, already in the habit of consuming food with their films, embracing the selling of popcorn was just a good business decision.

Independents had originally been the driving force behind concession stand developments, as seen in the first two chapters of this thesis, but by the 1940s the major studio-owned and affiliated exhibition chains had taken a more dominant and pro-active role. The increasing success and profits of refreshment sales drew the attention of the country's largest exhibition chains and the film trade press publications, helping to elevate the concession stand's status within the film exhibition industry. In December 1948, *The Modern Theatre* summarised the findings of a study that the publication had undertaken in relation to the concession stand. Reporting that 98 percent of American movie-theatres were offering some variation of concession stand (with popcorn, candy, and soda, being the most popular

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<sup>660</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 81.

items), the report commented that: ‘... long recognised as an extremely important adjunct of the entertainment industry, [the concession stand] is being given merchandising support and attention worthy of its income-producing position, which in many quarters equals or exceeds the box office.’<sup>661</sup> There is no denying that the conditions of World War II had been difficult for the concession stand, but from the immediate post-war years, it was thriving once again – as *The Modern Theatre*’s survey demonstrated.<sup>662</sup> No longer an inconsequential side-line, it was a profitable business in its own right, and the foundations were in place for it to boom – as the next chapter will discuss.

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<sup>661</sup> Floyd Mix, ‘What’s Being Sold at Theatre Refreshment Counters?’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 54:5, December 4, 1948, 8.

<sup>662</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

## Chapter Four: The Age of the Concession Stand, 1949-1955

Opened in late August 1954, the Westbury Drive-In theatre in Long Island, New York, exemplified the heights that the drive-in theatre would reach during its golden age in the mid-1950s. Situated on a 28-acre lot and with a staff of 60, it had a capacity of 2,024 cars (the equivalent of 9,000 people).<sup>663</sup> Equipped with the newest sound and screen technologies, the Westbury boasted the largest screen tower operating within America at that time. The jewel in its crown, however, was its impressive concession stand. Costing \$135,000 to construct, it contained top of the range equipment – the best available in 1954.<sup>664</sup> Adopting the popular cafeteria-style serving system, its capacity was so large that it required six lanes of traffic in order properly to accommodate the intermission rush. Alongside popcorn, candy, and soda – by this point, all established drive-in concession mainstays – patrons had access to more unusual items, notably pizzas and Chinese egg rolls. The Westbury’s refreshment stand is a prime example of a drive-in theatre concession stand at its peak – an operation vastly superior to that of its indoor equivalent.

Previous chapters have focused exclusively on various indoor exhibition models. This one, in contrast, brings into the discussion a less traditional movie-theatre. Located outdoors, the drive-in theatre transformed the movie-going experience and, specifically, the manner in which films were consumed. The car replaced the movie-theatre auditorium, a change which had a profound effect on the exhibition space and movie-going experience. Originating in the early 1930s, the drive-in theatre developed in parallel to the indoor exhibition models previously discussed, but did not reach its own high point until the post-war years. As featured in *The Modern Theatre*, the case study of the Westbury Drive-In is one example of

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<sup>663</sup> Sumner Smith, ‘One-Screen, 2,024-Car Capacity Drive-In’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 65:15, August 7, 1954, 64-66.

<sup>664</sup> Anon., ‘Westbury D.I., Westbury, L.I., N.Y.’, *Theatre Catalogue, 1954-55* (Philadelphia: Jay Emanuel Publications, 12<sup>th</sup> Edition), 98.

the film industry's increased interest in the drive-in theatre by the mid-1950s as it established its position as a legitimate exhibition model. One area that underwent intense scrutiny was the concession stand, with a particular focus on maximising profits. Movie industry interest was a direct response to how lucrative the drive-in theatre model had become by the mid-1950s, especially in comparison to its indoor counterpart. Reporting on conditions in 1952, *The Modern Theatre* described how, for every dollar taken at the box office in ticket sales, the drive-in theatre took an additional 45 cents at the concession stand. The average indoor movie-theatre, in contrast, took 26 cents.<sup>665</sup> A sizeable difference, this highlighted just how superior the drive-in theatres' concession stand had become.

This chapter seeks to explore how this came about. What follows, therefore, is an in-depth analysis of the drive-in theatre's concession model, with a particular emphasis on the key developments that occurred between 1949 and 1955. Divided into three sections, the chapter will dissect how the unique nature of the drive-in theatre enabled it to elevate the concession stand as it did. The first part will discuss how this exhibition model developed, focusing specifically on the societal factors that led to its popularity in the aftermath of World War II – factors that also contributed to its success with refreshments. The second part of the chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the concession stand model operated at the outdoor movie-theatre. It will analyse its development and the key features that contributed to its success, as well as considering the wider influences that helped to shape it. The final section of the chapter redirects attention to the indoor movie-theatre. While it would not replicate the same levels of success during the 1950s, the indoor movie-theatre's refreshment operation was influenced by its outdoor counterpart. Elements of the drive-in theatre refreshment model slowly made inroads into the indoor movie-theatre at this time. The drive-in theatres' golden

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<sup>665</sup> Nevin I. Gage, 'Average Drive-In's Concession Gross Is Nearly Fifty Per Cent of the Ticket Dollar', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 60:14, February 2, 1952, 30.

age was short-lived, but as this chapter will ultimately demonstrate, it cast a long shadow over the indoor movie-theatre concession stand in the decades that followed.

## **Part I: A Radically Different Movie-going Experience**

### **‘A New and Useful Outdoor Theater’: Origins of the Drive-In Theatre, 1933-1948<sup>666</sup>**

Having survived the economic pressures of the Great Depression, and the upheaval of World War II, the post-war years marked a new period of struggle for the American film industry. While movie-theatre attendance had peaked immediately after World War II, with 1946 marking a new record for the film industry, this boom quickly became a crash. Within months of this high point, attendance rapidly began to decline, with 1949 marking a record low – one only beaten by attendance levels in more recent decades.<sup>667</sup> The post-war years were a period of upheaval for American film exhibition, largely due to the United States Supreme Court’s decision of 1948 in the *Paramount* case. This was the final result of an anti-trust suit – launched under pressure from independent exhibitors – by the Federal government in 1938 which targeted the Big 5’s [Paramount, Loew’s, RKO, Twentieth-Century Fox, and Warner Bros.] monopolistic hold on the film industry. The Hollywood studio system, as discussed in chapter one, operated on a model of vertical integration, whereby these studios controlled production, distribution, and exhibition. They dominated the industry, effectively controlling the films that were made but also who could exhibit them. In 1948, the Big 5 owned 70 percent of the first-run theatres, controlling exhibition in 92 of America’s largest cities, the studios co-operating with each other in order to limit independent exhibitors’

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<sup>666</sup> Kerry Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters: A History from Their Inception in 1933* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1992), 1.

<sup>667</sup> Thomas W. Bohn and Richard L. Stromgren, *Light and Shadows: A History of Motion Pictures* (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1987), 236. For detailed figures, see: Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 195-196.

access to film.<sup>668</sup> Deemed too oligarchic in the *Paramount* decision, Hollywood's most powerful film studios were ordered to separate from their exhibition chains.<sup>669</sup> Consequently, the Hollywood studio system, and specifically exhibition, was undergoing a period of significant upheaval in the years from 1948. This alone, however, does not account for the rapid decline in attendance.

The explanation traditionally used to understand this period – by both film industry experts at the time and subsequent scholars – relates the downturn in indoor movie-theatre attendance to the emergence of a new competitor, television. More convenient, accessible, and arguably cheaper (in the long term), the television would become a major source of competition as the number of sets within American homes steadily grew during the 1950s. The invasion of television was rapid, as Carroll Pursell notes in her history of post-war technology: 3.1 million television sets were sold in 1950, a figure which had increased to 32 million by 1955.<sup>670</sup>

While there is no doubt that television would come to pose a huge challenge by the late 1950s, it does not provide a wholly convincing argument for the decline in attendance in the immediate post-war years. As Gomery has highlighted, movie-theatre attendance began to decline steadily from 1946, a good nine years before television became widespread across America.<sup>671</sup> Moreover, attendance at indoor movie-theatres may have dwindled, but this was not true of all exhibition models operating during the period. The late 1940s saw a resurgence of a radically different exhibition model, one which capitalised upon the changing make-up of post-war American society. 'A uniquely American institution', the drive-in theatre

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<sup>668</sup> Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters*, 35.

<sup>669</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 176, 180.

<sup>670</sup> Carroll Pursell, *Technology in Postwar America: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 114.

<sup>671</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 84.

challenged its indoor equivalent in all sorts of ways, from the entertainment package it offered to the very notion that movie-theatre attendance was in decline.<sup>672</sup>

While the drive-in had its heyday in the 1950s, it had its origins in the Great Depression. Richard M. Hollingshead is credited with inventing and operating the first drive-in theatre, with the opening in 1933 of The Automobile Movie Theater located in Camden, New Jersey. Hollingshead, a businessman within the automobile field, astutely realised that America's growing car obsession was something that could be capitalised upon. Researching American spending habits, Hollingshead focused on what Americans 'gave up last', which according to him was: 'Food. Clothing. Autos. Movies. In that order.'<sup>673</sup> As early as the 1930s, therefore, automobiles and movies were important components of American life. It was a pairing that would prove highly profitable as the years progressed.

While his initial plan had been to open a petrol station that displayed films for people to watch as their cars were refuelled, Hollingshead's vision quickly changed. Film went from being a side attraction to the main event. After an extended period of experimentation, he designed the basic blueprint of the drive-in theatre: a series of tiered ramps facing a large screen which patrons viewed from within the comfort of their own cars. In a 1932 patent application (he would have limited success enforcing such patents), Hollingshead described his unique exhibition model:

My invention relates to a new and useful outdoor theater ... wherein the performance, such as a motion picture show or the like, may be seen and heard from a series of automobiles so arranged in relation to the stage or screen, that the successive cars behind each other will not obstruct the view.<sup>674</sup>

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<sup>672</sup> Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters*, vii.

<sup>673</sup> Don Sanders and Susan Sanders, *The American Drive-In Movie Theater* (St Paul, Minn.: Motorbooks International, 2003), 12, 14.

<sup>674</sup> Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters*, 1.

Drive-in theatres spread slowly across America during the 1930s and early 1940s.<sup>675</sup> Just as the nickelodeon had presented a very easy business opportunity at the turn of the century, so did the drive-in theatre during its early period. While this would change in the 1950s as theatre chains and corporations recognised the profit-making potential of drive-ins, during this early period most were built and operated by enterprising individuals.

From humble beginnings in the Great Depression, by the early 1940s drive-in theatres were slowly gaining momentum, their popularity growing as they spread across America. While this process would have undoubtedly continued organically, it was interrupted by World War II, a period in which the WPB halted all movie-theatre construction. Figures regarding the number of drive-in theatres operating at this time vary, but Kerry Segrave speculated that by 1942 there were 95 operating across America.<sup>676</sup> During the pre-war years, this exhibition model remained in its infancy, with theatres often rudimentary, and neither widespread nor commonplace. This would all change after the war, a period which saw a boom in drive-in theatre building. Built at an increasing pace, their numbers grew from 800 in 1948 to 2,000 by 1950, a figure that rose to more than 4,000 by 1956.<sup>677</sup> This is in stark contrast to what was occurring with indoor movie-theatres, as between 1948 and 1954 over 3,000 of these were forced to close.<sup>678</sup> Despite not having access to the best or newest film releases, Don and Susan Sanders claim that the drive-in theatre by 1951 was recording higher attendance levels than its indoor counterpart.<sup>679</sup> While indoor exhibitors and the wider film industry were openly hostile, the American public flocked to the drive-in theatre – and not for the films on show so much as the fact that this exhibition model truly understood and catered to the needs and wants of the post-war audience.

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<sup>675</sup> Ibid., 11-16.

<sup>676</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>677</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 91.

<sup>678</sup> Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2017), 133.

<sup>679</sup> Sanders and Sanders, *The American Drive-In Movie Theater*, 41.

### **‘A Magnet for Families’: The Baby Boom, Suburbanisation, and Car Culture<sup>680</sup>**

The drive-in theatre’s rapid growth after World War II had a lot to do with its ability to adapt to the conditions of post-war America, something its indoor counterpart was slow to do. The post-war period was marked in many ways by optimism and prosperity, markedly different from the previous two decades – years of austerity, instability, and conflict. In the wake of World War II, there was a sense that these hard times were over. No longer constrained by the need to live frugally, consumer spending increased by 60 percent between 1946 and 1955.<sup>681</sup> Household furnishings and appliances (for example, televisions and dishwashers) were among the top items to be consumed by the American public, but many families also visited their local car dealership.<sup>682</sup> As drive-in theatres spread across the nation in the late 1940s, so did car ownership: between 1945 and 1955 car registration almost doubled, from 25.8 million to 52.1 million.<sup>683</sup>

Many people had owned cars prior to the war, but the demand had increased significantly by the late 1940s. Motivated by the growing mobility of the public, it was the post-war years that cemented the car’s status as an important fixture of American life. This development not only led to a dramatic increase in car production, but also to a rapid expansion in infrastructure and roadside architecture, of which the drive-in theatre was one example. Cars were not only a necessary method of transportation, but also took on greater significance during the period as vehicles of freedom. They gave people the means to move and explore, with the expansion in highways effectively opening America up. The road network was mostly in place by the 1930s, meaning that despite the dire economic climate of the period, people had the means to sate what Chester H. Liebs has described as their ‘hunger

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<sup>680</sup> Frances Harding, ‘Cafeteria Service Spells CASH at the Drive-in’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 59:10, July 7, 1951, 33.

<sup>681</sup> Pursell, *Technology in Postwar America*, 99.

<sup>682</sup> Tom McCarthy, *Auto Mania: Cars, Consumers, and the Environment* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 101.

<sup>683</sup> *Ibid.*

for movement'.<sup>684</sup> Although a fixture of life for many prior to the war, it was in the post-war years that America's love affair with the car truly began – and this was something exhibitors needed to exploit. Indoor movie-theatres struggled to do so in the late 1940s, as many were located within urban areas and offered limited parking.<sup>685</sup> In contrast, the car was the motivation behind the drive-in theatre.

Located outside of towns where the land was considerably cheaper, the drive-in theatre enabled Americans to indulge their love of driving whilst also allowing them to take part in another traditional American pastime: movie-going.<sup>686</sup> The location became even more appealing as the period progressed and more and more Americans moved from urban areas into the newly developing suburbs – out of town locations in which there was initially a minimal indoor movie-theatre presence. Drive-in theatres' locations aided in their popularity, but it was the unique way in which the car was incorporated into the movie-going experience that accounts for their success. At the drive-in theatre, the car was not just a mode of transport but the auditorium, the space in which its audience watched the film. At a conventional indoor theatre, a film was viewed within an auditorium surrounded by other people. It was a public space – and one which was subject to specific societal expectations and behaviours, for instance, silence during the film. The drive-in theatre, in contrast, offered an entirely different experience. Watching a film from a car changed the nature of the movie-going space: it became both public and private. Public in the sense that it was used by others, but private in that, within the space of the car, the movie-goer had a semblance of isolation. They could socialise with others outside of the vehicle or at the concession stand, but equally had the freedom to watch a film within the privacy of their own vehicle. This was a

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<sup>684</sup> Chester H. Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985), 21.

<sup>685</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>686</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 169.

characteristic that held a particular appeal to a growing section of American society, a group who no longer felt welcome at indoor theatres: young families.

With the war over and men returning home, the years following World War II saw a dramatic increase in marriages and, subsequently, births. During 1946 alone, nearly three and a half million babies were born in America, a figure that was up 20 percent from 1945.<sup>687</sup> This baby boom continued into the mid-1960s and resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of young families, a group that struggled to adhere to the unspoken rules of the indoor theatre. The social behaviours expected there, for instance, of not talking or causing a disturbance, were not compatible with small children. As a result, many young couples who had frequented the movie-theatre regularly before starting families, simply stopped going. As was remarked in one cinema publication: ‘Children did not keep parents out of their automobiles, but did keep them from their favorite pastime – the movies.’<sup>688</sup>

As the popularity of the drive-in theatre grew, trade press publications began to take a greater interest in them. *Theatre Catalog*, an annual trade review which reflected on the state of the exhibition industry, for example, conducted several annual surveys analysing the drive-in theatre and its audience, beginning in the late 1940s. A re-occurring feature of these survey findings was that the majority of drive-in audiences were not frequent patrons of indoor theatres, and that 70-80 percent were comprised of young families.<sup>689</sup> Young couples who had attended the movies frequently prior to starting families became ‘lost’ to indoor exhibitors in the post-war years.<sup>690</sup> It is this, rather than competition from television, which provides the most convincing explanation for the downturn in indoor movie-theatre

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<sup>687</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 86.

<sup>688</sup> S. Herbert Taylor, ‘Planning the Drive-In’, *Theatre Catalog, 1948-49* (Philadelphia: Jay Emanuel Publications, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition), 255.

<sup>689</sup> *Ibid.*; George M. Petersen, ‘Layout and Construction of Auto Theatres’, *Theatre Catalog, 1947-48* (Philadelphia: Jay Emanuel Publications, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition), 181.

<sup>690</sup> Rodney F. Luther, ‘Second Annual Drive-In Audience Survey’, *Theatre Catalog, 1950-51* (Philadelphia: Jay Emanuel Publications, 9<sup>th</sup> Edition), 129.

attendance from 1946. While indoor movie-theatres no longer held the same appeal, these young families flocked to their outdoor counterpart.

A large factor in the initial attraction has much to do with the nature of outdoor movie-going, in that parents did not have to worry about their children disturbing others. Speaking in 1933, Hollingshead had already said as much: ‘The Drive-In theater idea virtually transforms an ordinary motor car into a private theater box. The younger children are not permitted in the movie theaters ... Here, the whole family is welcome, regardless of how noisy the children are apt to be.’<sup>691</sup> The unique space of the car meant that young families could once again attend the movies without the embarrassment that deterred them from attending a conventional movie-theatre. People did not need to dress up to attend, and it was not uncommon for children to go in their pyjamas and fall asleep during the film.<sup>692</sup> This relaxed attitude to movie-going is demonstrated by an announcement for the 1946 grand opening of the Circle Drive-In (owned and operated by the Ezell Drive-In circuit) in Waco, Texas: ‘There you may enjoy your favorite movies in the comfort and privacy of your own automobile. The drive-in theatre offers many advantages not found in other places of amusement. You may come dressed in your slacks and slippers or shorts.’<sup>693</sup> The lack of a need to dress up is once again emphasised, touted alongside the drive-in’s key selling points: comfort and privacy.

While indoor theatres were comfortable, the drive-in theatre offered an elevated level of comfort and privacy. Described by the auto historian Michael L. Berger as a ‘parlor on

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<sup>691</sup> Sanders and Sanders, *The American Drive-In Movie Theater*, 13.

<sup>692</sup> Anon., ‘A New American Institution’, *Theatre Catalog, 1948-49* (Philadelphia: Jay Emanuel Publications, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition), 221.

<sup>693</sup> Anon., ‘Circle Drive-In Theatre to Hold Opening Tonight’, *The Waco News-Tribune*, Waco: Texas, June 21, 1946, 17, available from: <https://www.newspapers.com/image/43659001/> [accessed March 12, 2021].

wheels’, the car was an extension of the home.<sup>694</sup> *Theatre Catalog* described the car similarly in 1948: ‘These persons prefer to enjoy their movies in practically the same privacy in which they enjoy reading the evening newspaper in their own homes.’<sup>695</sup> A method of transportation foremost, the car also became a private space used in everyday life. An adaptable space, it lent itself perfectly to being used as a movie-theatre.

Much of the American film industry was openly hostile to the drive-in theatre. Believed to be a major source of competition for indoor theatres by the 1950s, it was looked down upon by the major film studios and many indoor exhibitors. One way in which this hostility manifested itself was that, unlike the indoor venues, drive-in theatres did not have access to the newest releases. Instead, they were obliged to show older films and independently-produced pictures. As Segrave has described it, throughout the period drive-in theatres had ‘little more to choose from than third run, last run, or no run.’<sup>696</sup> Even with the films that they did show, exhibitors had to pay high film rentals, reportedly as high as 50-70 percent of ticket profits.<sup>697</sup> This was not a major problem, however, for one simple reason: the film on show became inconsequential. While the film was typically the culmination of the evening’s event, drive-in theatres were designed specifically to get families to spend as much time possible at the site, the theory being that the longer they spent on the premises the more money they would spend. This is important to acknowledge because it highlights the fact that the drive-in theatre was challenging the conventional movie-going experience. It was not a static experience governed by strict behavioural expectations, but rather an interactive one.

Film was one component of that experience, but movie-goers also had the opportunity to engage with other activities. ‘A magnet for families’, exhibitors offered all kinds of

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<sup>694</sup> Michael L. Berger, ‘The Car’s Impact on the American Family’, in *The Car and the City: The Automobile, the Built Environment, and Daily Urban Life*, ed. Martin Wachs and Margaret Crawford (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 59.

<sup>695</sup> Petersen, ‘Layout and Construction of Auto Theatres’, 180.

<sup>696</sup> Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters*, 59.

<sup>697</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-59; Sanders and Sanders, *The American Drive-In Movie Theater*, 71.

permanent services and entertainment to get families to spend additional time on site.<sup>698</sup>

Children's playgrounds, mini-golf, and swimming pools were among the most popular.

Firework displays and live music were also regular additions to the drive-in programme, used to make the night's entertainment even more appealing. Phil Blakey, manager of the Riverside Drive-In theatre in Kansas City, Missouri, described the benefits of including special events: 'These events have brought our patrons to the theatre earlier, have prompted them to bring friends with them, and perhaps, has helped bring them back to our drive-in more frequently than they would otherwise come.'<sup>699</sup>

Given its prominent location, the concession stand inevitably became the epicentre of all activity. Centrally located and the staging area of many events, it became the drive-in theatre's most stable source of profit. Charles Blood, an employee of the Star Manufacturing Company, stated that:

The refreshment stand has become firmly established as an integral part of every progressive drive-in theatre operation ... because confection sales form a sizeable percentage of total revenue ... refreshment receipts may well make up the admission losses on nights when attendance is down ...<sup>700</sup>

A reliable source of extra income for conventional indoor movie-theatres, by the mid-1950s the concession stand had become a lifeline for the drive-in theatre. While it radically transformed the traditional movie-going experience, it was the drive-in theatre's development of refreshment sales that was truly innovative.

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<sup>698</sup> Frances Harding, 'Cafeteria Service Spells CASH at the Drive-in', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 59:10, July 7, 1951, 33.

<sup>699</sup> Phil Blakey, 'Center Drive-In Promotions on Concession Sales', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 58:14, February 3, 1951, 12.

<sup>700</sup> Charles B. Blood, 'Station System Refreshment Vending', *Theatre Catalog, 1950-51* (Philadelphia: Jay Emanuel Publications, 9<sup>th</sup> Edition), 223.

### **‘Relatively Makeshift Efforts’: The Drive-in Theatre Concession Stand pre-1949**<sup>701</sup>

The layout and appearance may have changed dramatically during its lifetime, but the concession stand was always an integral component of the drive-in theatre. Reflecting on the rapid development of this exhibition model in 1950, *The Modern Theatre* commented that: ‘Almost from the inception of the drive-in theatre plan of showing motion pictures outdoors the idea of some sort of a concession stand has been standard equipment.’<sup>702</sup> From its origins in 1933, the drive-in theatre had always had some form of refreshments on sale.

Prior to World War II this typically consisted of candy, popcorn, coffee, and homemade sandwiches sold from a small stall. *Theatre Catalog* described the pre-war drive-in theatre’s refreshments as ‘small and relatively makeshift efforts’, an inevitable consequence of being operated by novice exhibitors.<sup>703</sup> The undeveloped nature of this early concession stand is, therefore, not surprising as it was a reflection of the drive-in theatre as a whole: an exhibition model still in its infancy. By the 1940s, popcorn and candy had established a presence within indoor movie-theatres. Sold from vending machines and manned candy counters, refreshments had proved popular with American audiences. It was only natural, therefore, that outdoor exhibitors hoped to replicate this success. While influenced by the indoor refreshment model, the addition of hot beverages and sandwiches demonstrates that the drive-in theatre challenged conventional norms from the beginning. Its unique movie-going experience granted exhibitors greater freedom to experiment. This would be pushed to dramatic new heights during the 1950s, but the early inclusion of these items is indicative of how different the drive-in theatre was from the outset.

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<sup>701</sup> Anon., ‘Drive-In Theatres of the United States’, *Theatre Catalog, 1948-49* (Philadelphia: Jay Emanuel Publications, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition), 198.

<sup>702</sup> Henry S. Inger, ‘Mobile Merchandising That Rolls Up Profits’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 57:5, June 3, 1950, 33.

<sup>703</sup> Anon., ‘Drive-In Theatres of the United States’, 198.

The post-war years witnessed not only a boom in drive-in theatre construction, but also concerted efforts to begin to streamline the concession stand. While most drive-in theatres were operated by independents or small regional chains, the post-war years saw a standardisation in the concession stand model which had been missing in the earlier period. This was a process that largely occurred during the 1950s, but there was one key development in the immediate post-war years: the relocation of the concession stand. Previously located in small buildings on the periphery of the lot, in the late 1940s the concession stand moved. Many incorporated it into the projection booth, a building which due to its function was located at the centre of the drive-in lot.<sup>704</sup> As the architectural historian Shannon Bell has described it: ‘Adding concessions to the functions of the operations building led to its standard location in the center of the lot where it was easily accessible to the greatest number of patrons, while still providing the best location for the projection room.’<sup>705</sup> As time progressed and the importance of refreshment sales grew, this changed slightly. From 1954 onwards, it was not uncommon for newly-built drive-in theatres to situate their concession business within a custom-built structure independent of the projection booth. This separation was necessary to cater to the ever-expanding size of the concession stand but did not affect its central location.

The correct location of the concession stand was the subject of much discussion in *The Modern Theatre*, regarding both the drive-in theatre but also indoor movie-theatres. Location was one of the most crucial factors for a concession stand’s success. A good, central location resulted in greater footfall and, consequently, increased profits. Heavy foot traffic continued to be important to the concession stand because the majority of its sales were

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<sup>704</sup> Petersen, ‘Layout and Construction of Auto Theatres’, 187.

<sup>705</sup> Shannon Bell, ‘From Ticket Booth to Screen Tower: An Architectural Study of Drive-in Theaters in the Baltimore–Washington, D.C.–Richmond Corridor’, *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, 9, Constructing Image, Identity, and Place (2003), 218.

impulse purchases. In 1950, it was estimated that impulse purchases accounted for 80 percent of concession sales.<sup>706</sup> Location was, therefore, crucial and by the post-war period exhibitors were becoming more aware of this. *The Modern Theatre* was brimming with articles encouraging exhibitors to take action: ‘Over and over again it has been proved in many theatres that the simple change of re-locating the concession stand in a more strategic spot, where it cannot be missed by incoming patrons, has resulted in substantial increases in sales.’<sup>707</sup> Not only did these articles exalt the benefits of proper location, but also provided enticing examples to support their claims: the Texan drive-in theatre chain, Ezell & Associates, reported in 1952 that refreshment sales in their eleven drive-in theatres increased between 30 to 35 percent as a result of relocating the building to a central location.<sup>708</sup> While indoor exhibitors continued to experiment with the correct location (a process which had begun in the late 1920s), drive-in theatres had found theirs by the late 1940s. The middle of the lot was the optimal location because it was not only the physical but also the social hub of the drive-in theatre.

Given its location, the concession stand inevitably became the natural gathering place for people to meet before or during the show. The manager of the Yakima Drive-In theatre in Yakima, Washington, commented that: ‘The refreshment counter located in the center of a ramp area ... opens up one-half hour before picture time, and is an informal gathering place for patrons, for there is no regimentation.’<sup>709</sup> Exhibitors encouraged this because it boosted profits, but also because it played an important social function within local communities. In her discussion of small-town film exhibition during the Great Depression, Kathryn Fuller-

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<sup>706</sup> Nevin I. Gage, ‘A Formula for Increasing Theatre Candy Sales’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 57:14, August 5, 1950, 8.

<sup>707</sup> I. L. Thatcher, ‘Editor’s Letter’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 63:19, September 5, 1953, 7.

<sup>708</sup> Albert H. Reynolds, ‘Some Things We Have Learned About Operating Drive-In Concessions’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 61:6, June 7, 1952, 29-30.

<sup>709</sup> Howard E. Jackson, ‘Merchandising Spells Success at the Yakima Drive-In’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 55:9, July 2, 1949, 28.

Seeley argues that the local movie-theatre took on a greater social significance. Not simply a place to watch film, it fulfilled an important function within the local community to which it belonged. In the context of the Great Depression, as mentioned in chapter two, this was in the form of material goods.<sup>710</sup> Fuller-Seeley's work focuses on indoor movie-theatres, but her insights could also be applied to the drive-in theatre. An article published in a local newspaper discussing the Cactus Drive-In (a holding of the Ezell Drive-In Circuit) located in Pharr, Texas, demonstrates this important community function: 'From providing children with monkeys to look at and playgrounds to play in, drive-in theaters are due to become the entertainment centers of their communities.'<sup>711</sup> Typically located in rural areas where other entertainments or public spaces were sparse, the drive-in gave communities a much-needed place to meet and socialise. The focal point of live events and activities, the concession building became the inevitable setting for socialisation.

The relocation of the concession stand in the post-war years was precipitated by the realisation that it was an extremely important source of profit for the drive-in theatre. While individual theatres still had their own distinct methods of selling food, a standardised model was emerging – one which would provide the template for drive-in theatre construction in the 1950s. Establishing the concession stand's optimal location was the first important development, but it was the changes that occurred between 1949 and 1955 that truly elevated the drive-in's refreshment operation.

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<sup>710</sup> Fuller-Seeley, 'Dish Night', 253-254.

<sup>711</sup> Anon., 'Movie Officials Visit Drive-In', *The Monitor*, McAllen: Texas, December 1, 1949, 2, available from: <https://www.newspapers.com/image/292873320/> [accessed March 12, 2021].

## Part II: The Concession Stand's Golden Age, 1949-1955

Reflecting on the drive-in theatre's concession stand in 1954, Howard I. Strum, a Sales Manager at the Poppers Supply Co. (a national popcorn wholesale company), remarked that:

Five or six years ago, when drive-in theatres were built, exhibitors had little concept of what the concessions buildings should be and could be. Consequently, many of the concessions buildings erected at that time are wholly inadequate to handle what has become of one of the biggest factors in drive-in theatres.<sup>712</sup>

Unlike the period he was commenting on, by 1954 a standardised and highly effective concession stand model was operated in drive-in theatres across America. This model was the result of several years of development, experimentation, and analysis. The relocation of the concession stand had been the first step, but it was the later developments which streamlined the outdoor refreshment model. These changes affected all aspects of the operation, notably the buildings design, serving system, management style and, most importantly, refreshments offered. Trade press magazines discussed these developments in great detail in their ongoing quest to provide the most up-to-date advice on how to operate a successful concession stand. Using expert advice (from exhibitors' but also concessionaires and equipment manufacturers), case studies, and national surveys, *The Modern Theatre* was at the cutting edge of these developments.

Close analysis of *The Modern Theatre* reveals the major trends and developments which occurred between 1949 and 1955, notably, the widescale adoption of the cafeteria system and further developments in concession machines and equipment. These changes had a significant impact upon the drive-in theatre concession stand's profitability during the

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<sup>712</sup> Howard I. Strum, 'Drive-In Concessions Layouts Can Be Easily Remodelled at Low Cost', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 65:23, October 2, 1954, 16.

1950s. Average annual profits in 1949 totalled 15 million dollars, a figure which had risen to 108 million dollars by 1959.<sup>713</sup> This was significantly more than indoor movie-theatres were making from the concession stand, demonstrating how developments implemented at the drive-in theatre enabled it to emerge as the superior refreshment model. In order to understand why the developments that occurred during this brief period were so effective, it is important to acknowledge that each was geared towards one specific factor: efficiency. While the indoor refreshment model remained largely unchanged, outdoor exhibitors realised that the key to success lay in maximising efficiency. Efficiency was critical at the drive-in theatre to ensure that the intermission rush was capitalised upon fully. Typically, a ten to fifteen-minute period, it was during the intermission that the average drive-in could expect to do 80 percent of a night's refreshment sales.<sup>714</sup>

The Ezell Drive-In Circuit was one of the largest operating throughout Texas between 1945 and 1955, at its peak controlling 17 drive-in theatres. One of the larger chains in terms of size, it was also at the forefront of drive-in innovation. Ezell drive-ins, for example, were the first to offer films in Cinemascope in early 1954.<sup>715</sup> Due to its leading position, it regularly featured in *The Modern Theatre* and members of its management often contributed articles. In regard to this thesis, it was the publication of the company's manual advising managers on concession stand operation that is of particular interest. Alongside practical advice, it emphasised the importance of the key fundamentals:

The real success of a drive-in theatre snack bar depends on three things – speed, courtesy and quality of merchandise ... Speed in making sales is dependent on the most efficient arrangement of dispensing equipment and on

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<sup>713</sup> Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, 131.

<sup>714</sup> Frances Harding, 'Cafeteria Service Spells CASH at the Drive-in', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 59:10, July 7, 1951, 33.

<sup>715</sup> Anon., 'Easter Eggs and Cinemascope', *The Corpus Christi Times*, Corpus Christi: Texas, April 15, 1954, 21, available from: <https://www.newspapers.com/image/21855449/> [accessed March 12, 2021].

the right selection and proper training of employees. Courtesy in making sales and quality merchandising are essential for building repeat sales.<sup>716</sup>

In this article, written by Albert Reynolds – a manager at Claude C. Ezell & Associates – speed of service, quality merchandise, and pleasant staff were highlighted as the necessary qualities needed to run a successful concessions operation. His chain's success made them an authoritative voice, and Reynolds' guidance reflected wider advice published in *The Modern Theatre* between 1947 and 1955. Expert advice, as well as first-hand experience, contributed to the realisation that in order successfully to capitalise on the intermission period, exhibitors needed to maximise efficiency. The remainder of Part II focuses on how it achieved this by analysing the mechanics of the drive-in theatre's concession stand: its layout, the machines used, the refreshments offered, and the effective way in which it was promoted.

#### **i. The Cafeteria System**

An area of 'considerable controversy' between 1949 and 1951 was the debate surrounding the correct serving style to be used at the drive-in theatre.<sup>717</sup> The station system, as explained below, was commonplace throughout much of the 1940s, but by 1950 had become outdated. Initially controversial, the cafeteria system which superseded it very quickly proved its superiority. More efficient, stylish and profitable, by 1951 the cafeteria system dominated drive-in theatres.

The manner in which food was served may seem inconsequential, but it was a crucial component of a concession stand's success. This is what drive-in operators came to realise in the years between 1949 and 1951, as they transitioned from a slow, inefficient system to a

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<sup>716</sup> Albert H. Reynolds, 'Snack Bar Data Is Included in Instructions to Ezell Managers', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 55:5, June 4, 1949, 36.

<sup>717</sup> Blood, 'Station System Refreshment Vending', 223.

fast, highly profitable one. The original serving style, the station model, was fairly basic. In his history of the drive-in theatre, Segrave succinctly outlined this system: ‘Whatever food or beverage the patron wanted to buy, he or she had to ask for it. The employee collected it, handed it over, received money, and gave out change.’<sup>718</sup> Its primary flaw was that it was inherently slow. Essentially a counter service model, there was no element of self-service and staff were required to serve one customer at a time. Expected to prepare and serve food to order as well as take payment, this type of service required full training on all equipment and food preparation matters, as well as cash handling.<sup>719</sup> A time-consuming process, it hindered the operator’s ability to cater to large volumes of people during the intermission rush. This inevitably became a point of contention, as it became glaringly obvious that sales were being lost. As previously discussed, the late 1940s saw increased analysis of the concession stand and its operating methods. A major development to result from this was the emergence of a new serving model: the cafeteria system.<sup>720</sup>

Influenced by the self-service nature of supermarkets and fast-food restaurants at the time, the cafeteria system was designed specifically to combat the issues which afflicted its predecessor.<sup>721</sup> In August 1950, Frances Harding, a regular contributor to *The Modern Theatre*, outlined what the cafeteria system was and also why it was needed:

Not only did the problem of speeding customer service at the counter need to be worked out, but in addition the pedestrian traffic flow through the building had to be made as fast and simple as possible. Towards this end a cafeteria type of layout was planned with an island ‘self-yourself’ counter in the center which patrons may pass on either side ... A wide variety of food items are

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<sup>718</sup> Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters*, 89.

<sup>719</sup> Blood, ‘Station System Refreshment Vending’, 225.

<sup>720</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>721</sup> Philip L. Lowe, ‘Cafeteria Systems for Drive-Ins’, *Theatre Catalog, 1950-51* (Philadelphia: Jay Emanuel Publications, 9<sup>th</sup> Edition), 226; Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: What the All-American Meal is Doing to the World* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 19-20.

sold ... and all of them are placed in serving trays where they may be reached easily by customers. Everything is prepared in advance and kept hot or cold, until purchased. Money is taken in payment for purchases only by cashiers so that patrons merely pass down the line to the cashier's desk at the center of the line. Two cashiers serve the building.<sup>722</sup>

Unlike its predecessor, the new cafeteria model was meticulously organised and designed. Laid out in a lane system, customers served themselves from pre-prepared food stations. The number of lanes required was dependent on the size of the drive-in theatre; however, the average was two to four. Customers followed the counter (laid out with various pre-prepared food stations) round to a cashier located at the end, where they paid and then exited the building. As Harding suggests, this not only made service quicker but its orderly nature also helped to avoid congestion during the busiest periods. From its gradual introduction in 1949, the cafeteria system quickly piqued the interest of drive-in operators and the trade press, who debated the relative pros and cons of this model.

The cafeteria system's key selling points were succinctly laid out in a feature piece published in the 1950-51 issue of *Theatre Catalog*. The article considered there to be several advantages, including but not limited to: larger volume of sales, less skilled help required, better cash control, and the separation of food preparation and service.<sup>723</sup> As previously discussed, the system was much faster. The use of lanes speeded up service so that the intermission period ran more efficiently. This was important because, according to *The Modern Theatre*, nothing scared away custom like having to wait in a long queue.<sup>724</sup> With the majority of refreshments pre-prepared ahead of the intermission, the cafeteria model also

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<sup>722</sup> Frances Harding, 'Cafeteria Layout Speeds Service at Drive-In', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 57:14, August 5, 1950, 46.

<sup>723</sup> Lowe, 'Cafeteria Systems for Drive-Ins', 226-227.

<sup>724</sup> Anon., 'Refreshment Manual: The ABC's of Drive-In Concessions', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 64:23, April 3, 1954, 24.

lessened pressure on staff. Under the older station system staff were expected to fulfil three roles: food preparer, server, and cashier.<sup>725</sup> This was a high-pressure job which required employees to be proficient in all areas of the concession operation. The new serving model eliminated a lot of this stress. Aside from cashiers, most staff simply had to refill food stations as and when needed, a position well-suited for high school and college students – workers who were often less skilled, but cheaper to employ. Of the advantages outlined by the *Theatre Catalog*, these were the most significant.

There was some debate between industry experts, however, as to whether the cafeteria system would prove universally advantageous. *The Modern Theatre* featured a manual written by Manley advising exhibitors on the ABCs of concession stand operation. In it, Manley suggested that the cafeteria model was better suited for larger drive-ins, those with a capacity of 800 cars or more.<sup>726</sup> The article did, however, qualify this by saying that ultimately it was up to the exhibitor to decide which method was best suited to their operation. This is important to highlight because it acknowledges that there was not one universal drive-in theatre model operating across America. The article also demonstrates that expert advice was just that: advice, not an absolute rule. Manley suggested that the cafeteria system was not suitable for small capacity drive-ins, but other articles published in *The Modern Theatre* contradicted this. In a different issue, Al Gordon advised that two lanes were sufficient for a drive-in theatre with a capacity of less than 600 cars.<sup>727</sup> Just as no drive-in theatre was the same, it is clear that industry opinion also differed.

In the midst of the building boom in the late 1940s, drive-in theatres had been built with such rapidity that the design of the concession stand (as well as other aspects, like the

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<sup>725</sup> Lowe, 'Cafeteria Systems for Drive-Ins', 226.

<sup>726</sup> Anon., 'Picking the Right Concessions Layout for Your Theatre', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 64:23, April 3, 1954, 26; Blood, 'Station System Refreshment Vending', 223.

<sup>727</sup> Frances Harding, 'Cafeteria Service Spells CASH at the Drive-in', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 59:10, July 7, 1951, 33.

sound system) were often secondary.<sup>728</sup> The original concession stands installed in post-war drive-ins rapidly became inadequate, resulting in a period of renovation in the early 1950s. Conversion to the cafeteria system was often included within the modernisation overhauls, vocally encouraged by *The Modern Theatre*. Strum, a regular contributor, was a strong proponent of the cafeteria system. He encouraged exhibitors to adapt their operations because the benefits far outweighed the relatively small cost of conversion.<sup>729</sup>

Influenced by the trade press which highlighted the importance of analysis and careful monitoring to the running of a successful concession stand, it is clear that by 1950 many exhibitors had adopted a similar approach. One example was The Cross Keys Drive-In Theatre in New Oxford, Pennsylvania. After careful analysis of their 1950 season, the managers examined their refreshment business focusing specifically on the efficiency of their operation. Viewing it in this way enabled them to see its flaws, information which then informed the design of their new concession stand. While time-consuming, renovation resulted in a dramatic increase in profits: during the 1950, season refreshments accounted for 50 percent of box office grosses, a figure that increased to 75 percent during the 1951 season.<sup>730</sup> The growing popularity of the cafeteria model not only affected pre-existing drive-ins but also new builds. According to *Theatre Catalog*, by 1950 approximately 90 percent of new drive-ins under construction in New England were built with the cafeteria model, a trend reflected across America.<sup>731</sup> With widespread installation of the cafeteria model occurring from 1950, it is unsurprising that by early 1951 it had secured its position as the standard model.

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<sup>728</sup> Kenneth Hudnall, 'Editor's Letter', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 58:14, February 3, 1951, 7.

<sup>729</sup> Howard I. Strum, 'Drive-In Concessions Layouts Can Be Easily Remodelled at Low Cost', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 65:23, October 2, 1954, 16.

<sup>730</sup> Harry Hart, 'Drive-In Men Boost Concession Sales With Variable-Heat Sandwich Units', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 60:6, December 8, 1951, 34, 40.

<sup>731</sup> Lowe, 'Cafeteria Systems for Drive-Ins', 226.

Drastically changing the nature of the concession stand may have been a daunting prospect for exhibitors, especially small independents, but it was a risk that paid off. Ahead of the grand opening of the Heart Drive-In Theatre in Kansas City, Missouri, for example, *The Modern Theatre* did an extensive feature on its concession operation. Among descriptions of its new equipment and menu, the article reported that its cafeteria system could serve 500 people during the 12 to 15-minute intermission period.<sup>732</sup> The Ezell Drive-In Circuit recorded similar improvements, operating the cafeteria system in conjunction with a new horseshoe shaped counter (the counter was curved as opposed to straight, creating increased service space). By 1952, its drive-ins were reportedly able to serve 420 people during the 15-minute intermission period, which equated to 76 people every 3-to-5-minutes.<sup>733</sup> As these case studies demonstrated, the cafeteria system of serving was undeniably quicker. Faster service improved customer satisfaction because movie-goers no longer had to wait to be served. As many exhibitors experienced first-hand, happy customers meant larger purchases. The Mohawk Drive-In Theatre in Albany, New York, for example, reported that sales per customer increased by approximately 4 to 5 cents using the cafeteria system.<sup>734</sup> Over time this amounted to a sizeable increase in profits. If, for instance, the Mohawk served 500 people in the 15-minute intermission period, then they could expect to make an extra \$25 per day, which equated to thousands of extra dollars per year.<sup>735</sup>

By 1951, the cafeteria system was the dominant serving model in operation in drive-in theatres across America, not only revolutionising the manner in which refreshments were

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<sup>732</sup> Anon., 'The Heart Underscores Hospitality', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 63:14, August 1, 1953, 47.

<sup>733</sup> Albert H. Reynolds, 'Some Things We Have Learned About Operating Drive-In Concessions', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 61:6, June 7, 1952, 30.

<sup>734</sup> Anon., 'Cafeteria Service Produces More Cents-Per-Person Over Old-Style Setup', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 67:6, June 4, 1955, 39.

<sup>735</sup> This figure is taken by multiplying the average number of patrons the average drive-in could serve in a 15-minute intermission period (according to *The Modern Theatre*) with the 5 cents figure. This results in 2,500 cents, which equates to \$25.

served, but also how they were laid out within the concession building. Preparedness was key to ensuring efficiency and quick service. Subsequently, most of the foods on offer, specifically hot foods, were pre-prepared ahead of the intermission so that people could serve themselves. This constituted the bulk of the concession stand fare and, as the 1950s progressed, the sophistication of concession equipment evolved to support this, as will be discussed in the following section. Pre-prepared food was laid out at separate food stations accessible for patrons and topped up as and when needed. Self-service was crucial to these food stations, but also extended to other elements of the concession stand. As the 1950s progressed, customers were encouraged to serve themselves items like ice cream and soft drinks from dispensers. This was an important development because, before then, these machines were typically located behind counters only to be used by staff. What many exhibitors realised by 1951, however, was that many people enjoyed serving themselves. The Riverside Drive-In, in Kansas City, Missouri, for example, saw ice cream profits increase by 50 percent after switching to self-service.<sup>736</sup>

All of the above design developments are present in the ideal layout suggested by Strum. This floorplan provides a standard example of the cafeteria system, representative of the concession layout operated in drive-in theatres from 1951.<sup>737</sup> It shows the operation of a one-way system within the lane area and use of separate entrance and exit doors. These were design features which, along with the use of slow and fast service lanes, became standard features of the cafeteria model, designed to eliminate bottlenecks during the intermission rush.<sup>738</sup> The floorplan also shows the ordered layout of the different self-service food stations:

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<sup>736</sup> Phil Blakey, 'Center Drive-In Promotions on Concession Sales', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 58:14, February 3, 1951, 13.

<sup>737</sup> Howard, I. Strum, 'Drive-In Concessions Layouts Can Be Easily Remodelled at Low Cost', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 65:23, October 2, 1954, 17.

<sup>738</sup> David F. Barrett, 'Many Innovations in New Drive-In', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 65:2, May 8, 1954, 67; I. L. Thatcher, 'Three Concessions Speed Patron Service', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 64:2, November 7, 1953, 23.

note that the hot and cold items are separated. The lane ends in the cashier desk and building exit. In another attempt to cut congestion, many situated condiments separately from the hot dogs and hamburgers. Located at a station outside of the lane system, customers could help themselves before leaving, cutting down on congestion at the food stations.<sup>739</sup> Strum's floorplan is just one of many published in *The Modern Theatre*, but it is useful because it is paired with an example of the old station system. (See Image 5.) These floorplans demonstrate just how better organised the cafeteria system was. Utilising space much more efficiently, not only in regards to the layout of the food and service system, but also in the increased storage space it created – a major benefit for operators as the variety of refreshments on offer increased. The cafeteria system did not completely eradicate all aspects of the old concession stand, but instead found a way to incorporate them effectively into the new model. A prime example of this was the continued presence of vending machines.

Candy and chocolates tended not to be located within the cafeteria lanes, but were instead available from vending machines or counter displays at the cashier station.<sup>740</sup> This was yet another attempt to limit congestion. Since they were small, inexpensive purchases, the key consumer of candy was children. As Segrave describes: 'While they were important to the concessions business, children could be a bit of a nuisance by slowing down lines plus the fact that they normally had much less to spend than adults.'<sup>741</sup> Essentially a pocket money purchase, candy was not a high-profit item. If located within the lane system, it had the potential to cause congestion, meaning that higher value sales could be lost. By selling candy from a vending machine, children could bypass the lane system and still make purchases.<sup>742</sup> While single purchases were small, it was a stable source of profit. There was also a notable

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<sup>739</sup> Haviland F. Reves, 'Detroit Drive-In Refreshment Service Good Example of Sound Operation', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 55:18, September 3, 1949, 28.

<sup>740</sup> Lowe, 'Cafeteria Systems for Drive-Ins', 229.

<sup>741</sup> Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters*, 92.

<sup>742</sup> Howard E. Jackson, 'Merchandising Spells Success at the Yakima Drive-In', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 55:9, July 2, 1949, 28.

increase during this period in cigarette vending machines. To avoid congestion in the lane system, these were located close to the entrance of the concession stand. While also present in indoor movie-theatres, cigarettes were particularly popular at outdoor theatres. As *Better Refreshment Merchandising* suggested, this was largely because smoking was an activity that could easily be enjoyed within one's own car.<sup>743</sup> Just as exhibitors in the 1920s had found: vending machines required very little attention but offered good returns. A few machines located at strategic spots throughout the concession building was a sensible idea, accounting for approximately 15-20 percent of a drive-in theatre's refreshment profits in the mid-1950s.<sup>744</sup>

The cafeteria system itself was not static, but in a constant state of flux. Introduced in 1951, it was far from being a finished system but one that was always adjusting in line with changing trade press advice and new concession equipment.<sup>745</sup> The traditional indoor concession model had developed gradually over several decades and was slow to evolve. The drive-in theatre, in contrast, was quick moving. Drive-in theatres constantly reconfigured their concession operations to maximise efficiency and profitability, developments which arose from their continuing meticulous analysis of their refreshment operation. This not only meant that drive-in theatres' concession stands were operating at the highest level possible but also, unlike their indoor counterparts, were not in danger of becoming outdated.

Rapidly changing how food was laid out and served, the cafeteria system was an important development within the drive-in theatre's concession stand. Geared towards efficiency and maximising profits, this new model ensured that operators could manage the intermission rush, and work to their full capacity. The layout and method of service changed

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<sup>743</sup> Anon., 'Use of Cigarette Vending Machines on Increase', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Refreshment Merchandising*, 196:2, July 10, 1954, 5-R.

<sup>744</sup> David O. Tubbs, 'Spot Venders at Strategic Points To Lessen Congestion at Stand', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 65:2, May 8, 1954, 12.

<sup>745</sup> I. L. Thatcher, 'Editor's Letter', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 68:6, December 3, 1955, 7.

as a result of the widescale conversion to cafeteria system, but it was not an isolated development. Its success was only possible because it worked in tandem with other changes, specifically the expansion and growing sophistication of concession equipment, supplies, and machines.

## **ii. An Expansion in Concession Machines and Equipment**

From the beginning there was a ready market for refreshments at the drive-in theatre: exhibitors just needed to tap into it. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, it was common for families to bring their own refreshments. The concession stand during this time was largely used to supplement these items brought from home. Commenting on audience habits in 1949, *The Modern Theatre* described how beverages were the most popular item purchased on site: ‘families that patronize drive-ins often bring along their own picnic lunch and camp out on the theatre grounds an hour or so before the start of the show. To supplement their own food they want hot coffee, bottled beer and, of course, soft drinks.’<sup>746</sup> While it was easy for families to pack sandwiches and other food items, drinks proved problematic due to their propensity to leak. Not only was convenience a factor but the drive-in’s selection was more attractive. Movie-goers had access to a variety of hot beverages and ice-cold drinks – a selection which was more desirable than the lukewarm offerings brought from home. Rather than supplementing picnics with small concession purchases, exhibitors needed to entice patrons to purchase all of their refreshments from one convenient place. Coffee, sandwiches, and popcorn were not considered enough of a pull in the 1940s, stimulating exhibitors and concessionaires to experiment with the concession stand’s boundaries. Contemporary to the emergence of the cafeteria serving model, between 1949 and 1955 the drive-in theatre

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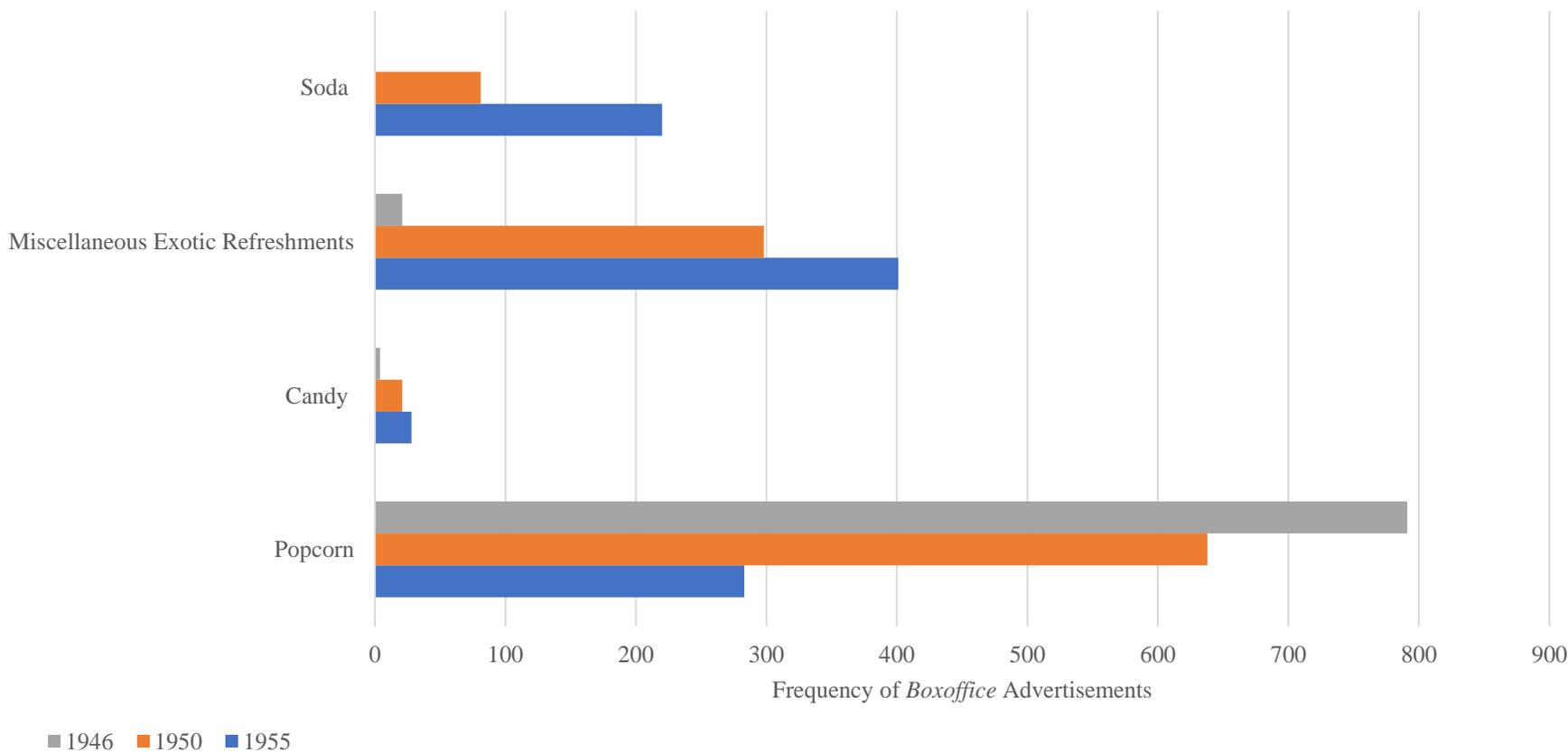
<sup>746</sup> David F. Barrett, ‘Wider Variety Required at Drive-Ins’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 54:14, February 5, 1949, 29.

witnessed an expansion in its menu. This was precipitated by rapid advances within concession technology, developments targeted specifically at the drive-in theatre market. In the space of a few years the quality and sophistication of concession-related machines and equipment evolved significantly.

The advertisements printed in *The Modern Theatre* are testament to this, providing evidence that not only were machines vastly superior by 1955, but that there was also much greater variety. Close analysis of the advertisements published between 1946 and 1955 reveals the changing nature of the concession machines and supplies being manufactured and sold throughout the period – products which, as the decade progressed, were increasingly targeted at the drive-in theatre market. This growing diversification is illustrated by Figure 6. In 1946, a period when the drive-in theatre was still in its adolescence, the well-established concession triad dominated: popcorn, candy, and soft drinks. Advertisements for soda fountains and chocolate bars were common, but it was popcorn that continued to dominate the market. Alongside adverts for the latest popcorn machines, there was also an ever-growing selection of popcorn related paraphernalia (for example, seasoning, raw popcorn, and branded cartons) for exhibitors to consider. The dominance of these items is not surprising. In the late 1940s these were the mainstays of the refreshment stand. This changed as the drive-in theatre established a stronger presence within America. Its dominance over the concession stand diversified the market, encouraging refreshment companies and concessionaires to saturate the market with a greater variety of specialised goods.

Advertisements for the concession stand staples continued to dominate the 1950s, but it is evident from Figure 6 that new refreshments were also emerging. This was a gradual process: by 1950 advertisements for equipment and supplies relating to hot dogs, ice cream, and snow cones regularly appeared alongside those for popcorn machines and soda fountains.

Figure 6: A comparison of the frequency of concession stand related advertisements published in *Boxoffice*, tracing the transition over time from the concession industry's emphasis on popcorn to the drive-in theatre market.



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Data compiled from analysis of all issues of *Boxoffice* from 1946, 1950, and 1955, respectively.

By 1955, the variety of goods had reached new heights. Advertisements for foods like chilli, French fries, and doughnuts, flooded the market enabling exhibitors to experiment with all manner of new and unusual offerings. It is important to recognise that developments within drive-in theatre-related equipment came in two distinct but overlapping phases: the first phase between 1949 and 1952 witnessed the streamlining and specialisation of pre-existing concession equipment to better suit the drive-in theatre's needs, and the second phase which occurred between 1950 and 1955 saw the introduction of new machines with increasingly exotic products, additions specifically intended for the drive-in theatre market.

Halted during World War II, when production restarted in 1946, as discussed in chapter three, it was the popcorn machine that was the focus of significant development in the immediate post-war years. Having established its dominance as *the* American movie snack during the war, manufacturers devoted their attention to creating new popcorn machines because there was a high demand for them. At this point there was no differentiation: concession machines were intended for use in both indoor and drive-in theatres. The drive-in theatre had yet to prove its true profit-making potential by 1946, which might account for the lack of specialised drive-in equipment. By 1949, however, this was beginning to change. As *The Modern Theatre* regularly highlighted, the drive-in theatre was emerging as a highly lucrative market for concession-related equipment and supplies. Small independent manufacturers and concessionaires jumped on this trend, together with notable names in the industry, for example, Manley and Cretors.

The year 1949, saw both of these leading companies release new popcorn machines targeted specifically at the drive-in theatre. Manley, for example, launched a new advertising campaign for its drive-in model in May of that year. One stand-out feature of the full-page advertisement is the large text box proclaiming that the model was 'engineered and designed

for bigger profits in drive-in theatre operation'.<sup>747</sup> Eye-catching, this clearly distinguished it from the company's indoor models which were also regularly advertised in the publication. Larger capacity and extra storage were among its key selling points, not unlike the features of a typical indoor model. The inclusion of the warming oven (used to keep pre-popped popcorn warm and fresh), however, was unusual. This feature was indicative of how Manley was beginning to redesign products better to suit the needs of the drive-in theatre. Incorporated into this particular popcorn machine, by the early 1950s the popcorn warmer had become a stand-alone piece of concession equipment.

Since the 1920s the standard method of popcorn production had been a popcorn machine, a machine which popped and seasoned corn as and when needed. While the end product was the same, the popcorn warmer prepared the popcorn in a different manner. Rather than popping the corn fresh, the warmer simply heated pre-popped (and seasoned) popcorn. Unlike a popcorn machine which needed constant supervision, the warmer meant exhibitors could pre-prepare boxes of popcorn ahead of busy periods. Despite increasing efficiency, when the warmer was first introduced in 1948 it proved divisive.<sup>748</sup> Many within the industry believed that for a better-quality product, popcorn needed to be made fresh in a popcorn machine. Charles Manley, the President of Manley, was among those who initially opposed the warmer. He believed that the sight of corn popping and the pleasant aroma produced by the popcorn machine created a sensory spectacle that generated sales. The popcorn warmer did not have the same sensory allure, which was a concern. Writing in 1948, Manley recommended the popcorn warmer as a last resort, only to be used by large indoor movie-theatres which struggled to compete with heavy demand just using popcorn

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<sup>747</sup> Manley, 'Popcorn Machine Advertisement', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 55:1, May 7, 1949, 33.

<sup>748</sup> Haviland F. Reves, 'Popcorn Problems and Profits at the Drive-In', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 56:14, February 4, 1950, 28.

machines.<sup>749</sup> Evidently, this opinion had changed by the following year, at least in relation to the drive-in theatre.

Still incorporated into the 1949 model, by the mid-1950s Manley and other companies were producing standalone warmers. The Servette 700 manufactured by Servemaster was one example that became available in early 1955. Costing \$295, advertisements for this popcorn warmer emphasised its key features: it had greater storage capacity, an attractive chrome finish, and could easily be incorporated into a self-service model of the concession stand.<sup>750</sup> The reason for this reversal in attitude towards the popcorn warmer was that it was perfectly suited to the cafeteria serving model. Popcorn could be pre-packaged ahead of the intermission and kept warm, and the machine's open display meant customers had easy access to the pre-boxed popcorn.<sup>751</sup> These machines also attempted to address concerns about the loss of sensory spectacle. In an attempt to increase the visual appeal of the machine, it was not uncommon for popcorn warmers to have a display window showing the popcorn in constant movement, replicating the popping action of a traditional popcorn machine.<sup>752</sup> Despite the industry's initial uncertainty, by the mid-1950s the popcorn warmer had become a standard fixture of the drive-in theatre. In 1954, Strum argued that the popcorn warmer was a 'must' for any such theatre – a statement with which almost all outdoor exhibitors would have agreed.<sup>753</sup> In subsequent decades it entered the indoor movie-theatre, and remains the dominant method used by multiplexes today.

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<sup>749</sup> Charles G. Manley, 'Popcorn Sells Best Served Fresh and Hot from the Kettle', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 52:13, January 31, 1948, 34.

<sup>750</sup> Hollywood Servemaster Company, 'Miscellaneous Servemaster Equipment Advertisement', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 66:19 (March 5, 1955), 21.

<sup>751</sup> Lowe, 'Cafeteria Systems for Drive-Ins', 229.

<sup>752</sup> Anon., 'Moving Popcorn Impresses Customers', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 53:15, August 14, 1948, 48.

<sup>753</sup> Howard I. Strum, 'Drive-In Concessions Layouts Can Be Easily Remodelled at Low Cost', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 65:23, October 2, 1954, 17.

Alongside advances in popcorn machines, from the late 1940s there were also significant developments in other established concession items, specifically in regard to beverages. Soda was a relatively new component of the concession stand, having only been introduced on a widescale basis to indoor movie-theatres during the immediate post-war years. Following 1946, it was the fastest-growing item within the movie-theatre concession stand, with dispensers and related equipment being installed at a rapid pace. By late 1951, for example, it was estimated that 69 percent of indoor cinemas sold soda.<sup>754</sup> Demand for soft drinks (referring largely to carbonated drinks, but also juice in some cases) only grew as the 1950s progressed.<sup>755</sup> Given its popularity with audiences, it was inevitable that soda excelled in sales at the drive-in theatre as well. It was reported that, by February 1951, it accounted for 27.3 percent of the drive-in theatres' refreshment sales, in contrast to just 9.5 percent at the indoor theatres.<sup>756</sup>

Just as at the indoor movie-theatre, there were a number of means of dispensing soda available to outdoor exhibitors, the most popular being self-service dispensers and fountains, coin-operated cup vending machine, or glass bottles.<sup>757</sup> In the four drive-in theatres operated by the Waters Theatre Company, a small exhibition chain that also controlled several indoor movie-theatres in Birmingham, Alabama, it was the latter – bottles which could then be poured into paper cups – that proved the most popular.<sup>758</sup> As the period progressed and the concession industry increasingly tailored their products towards the drive-in theatre market, this aspect of the concession stand advanced further. In line with the wider trends of self-

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<sup>754</sup> Nevin I. Gage, 'Soft Drink Survey: Sixty-Nine Per Cent of All Indoor Theatres Are Now Selling Soft Drinks', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 60:1, November 3, 1951, 23.

<sup>755</sup> In line with the family friendly environment that the drive-in theatre was cultivating, alcohol was not typically sold at the concession stand during the 1940s and 1950s. Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters*, 66.

<sup>756</sup> Nevin I. Gage, 'Theatre Candy Survey, Part II', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 58:14, February 3, 1951, 34.

<sup>757</sup> Pepsi-Cola, 'Pepsi-Cola Drink Dispenser Advertisement', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 62:19, March 7, 1953, 27.

<sup>758</sup> Anon., 'North, East, South and West – Theatremen Say, "Beverages Pay"', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 60:6, December 8, 1951, 9.

service and efficiency that came to dictate the drive-in theatre's refreshment operation, increasingly, by the mid-1950s, exhibitors looked to more sophisticated means of dispensing drinks.

By 1953, 100 percent of America's drive-in theatres sold soda, in contrast to 78 percent of indoors (this was an increase from 64 percent in 1952).<sup>759</sup> While automatic cup dispensers and bottles remained popular, increasingly there was a trend to install automatic dispensers and soda fountains. Designed to be more efficient, these machines differed from other dispensing methods in that they had the capability of serving many more people in a shorter amount of time. An advertisement from 1953 for the Sodamaster, a 'self-contained refrigerated beverage dispenser', boasted that with 'a variety of drinks ... at your finger tips' the Sodamaster could 'handle the intermission crowds with ease'.<sup>760</sup> In a bid to improve efficiency, the Sharon Drive-In in Calhoun Falls, South Carolina, replaced bottled drinks with a soda fountain. A relatively small drive-in theatre with a 200-car capacity, it had by late 1954 seen a 25 percent decrease in attendance. Its owner hoped that by improving the concession stand, the installation of a soda fountain being the largest project, they could improve business. While attendance itself remained low, following the alterations to their concession stand the refreshment business was up more than 25 percent.<sup>761</sup> This relatively simple shift in method of dispensing had the potential, as the Sharon Drive-In demonstrated, to boost profits significantly. It was not just exhibitors who reaped these benefits, however. Since the beginning of that year, Dr Pepper had seen demand for its own soda fountain equipment increase by over 25 percent within the nation's outdoor movie-theatres.<sup>762</sup> In the

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<sup>759</sup> Anon., '1953 Poll on Vending Moves Popcorn to Top', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 190:12, March 21, 1953, 30.

<sup>760</sup> Carbonic Dispenser Inc., 'Sodamaster Advertisement', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 62:19, March 7, 1953, 26.

<sup>761</sup> Anon., 'How a 200-Car Drive-In Theatre Increased Sales 25 Per Cent', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 65:19, September 4, 1954, 21.

<sup>762</sup> Anon., 'Dr Pepper Sales Up', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Refreshment Merchandising*, 196:7, August 14, 1954, 8-R.

summer of 1954, it announced that its share price was up by 11 percent, something the company attributed to the increased use of its soda fountains.<sup>763</sup>

While the majority of indoor movie-theatres had embraced soft drinks by the early 1950s, many still did not allow them within the auditorium.<sup>764</sup> Not constrained by the same concerns of mess, drive-in theatres had the means to elevate this element of their operation further. One way in which they did this was by branching into hot drinks. Coffee and hot chocolate were largely unheard of at indoor movie-theatres during the post-war period.<sup>765</sup> This was not the case at the nation's drive-in theatres. Appealing to parents and buoyed by the unique movie-going experience that the car presented, namely that hot drinks could help ward off any chills, coffee was a successful addition to the outdoor concession stand. Automatic vending machines, like the Coffee Service vendor manufactured by Mills Industries Inc., hit the concession market in the early 1950s. Targeted at the drive-in theatre, it was a 500-cup capacity self-service vendor that movie-goers could operate themselves.<sup>766</sup> Machines like the Multimixer, which entered the market in 1953, also meant that malt and milkshakes could be easily pre-prepared ahead of busy periods. One of the Multimixer's key selling points was its ability to make multiple drinks at one time.<sup>767</sup> Sleek and compact, these machines could all easily be incorporated within the refreshment building.

Portable refreshment carts, designed solely for use at the drive-in theatre, also came onto the market in the early 1950s. Enticed by the refreshments on offer and persuasive

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<sup>763</sup> Anon., 'Dr Pepper Earnings Up in 1954, Fountain Sales Jump 25 Per Cent', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 65:19, September 4, 1954, 26.

<sup>764</sup> A survey undertaken by *The Modern Theatre* into the soda business within the nation's indoor movie-theatres found that while 69 percent now sold soft drinks, only 58 percent allowed movie-goers to take beverages into the auditorium. Nevin I. Gage, 'Soft Drink Survey: Sixty-Nine Per Cent of All Indoor Theatres Are Now Selling Soft Drinks', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 60:1, November 3, 1951, 23.

<sup>765</sup> Sanders and Sanders, *The American Drive-In Theater*, 74.

<sup>766</sup> Anon., 'Selective Coffee Vendor', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 67:2, May 7, 1955, 12.

<sup>767</sup> Prince Castle, 'Multimixer Advertisement', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 62:19, March 7, 1953, 26-C.

intermission trailers, the majority of movie-goers made regular visits to the drive-in concession stand. Not all were so easily convinced, however. Approximately 40 percent of drive-in goers did not use the intermission to visit the concession stand, instead choosing to remain in their vehicles.<sup>768</sup> This was particularly true of the colder months, when people were reluctant to leave the warmth of their cars.<sup>769</sup> Portable carts were introduced by many exhibitors in an attempt to combat this. During the intermission period, an attendant would be tasked with pushing a fully-stocked cart around the lot. The Walky-Service Company based in Wichita, Kansas, was one of the leading suppliers, and a complete line was available from 1950. One of its leading products was the Buffeteria. This was a cart on wheels that could vend a range of hot and cold foods (containing both refrigerated and warming sections to keep refreshments at the correct temperature).<sup>770</sup> For smaller capacity drive-in theatres, the company also designed the Walky-teria. Similar to the Buffeteria, in that it had the capacity to stock warm and cold foods, its main difference was that it was a smaller unit that was designed for the attendant to carry.<sup>771</sup> By integrating portable services like this within their concession stand operation, exhibitors were able to target those movie-goers that would not physically visit the stand themselves.<sup>772</sup>

This period also saw the emergence of other concession-related equipment intended to boost serving efficiency, for example, the Speed-Scoop released in 1948.<sup>773</sup> This was a small plastic scoop designed quickly to fill popcorn bags. Other smaller innovations included the

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<sup>768</sup> Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters*, 95.

<sup>769</sup> Walky-Service Company, 'Buffeteria Advertisement', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 56:10, January 7, 1950, 18.

<sup>770</sup> Ibid.

<sup>771</sup> Ibid.

<sup>772</sup> Some drive-in theatres went further by introducing an at-car refreshment ordering system. In this system, an attendant would come to the car and take the order, get the food from the concession building and take payment, before moving on to the next vehicle. As Sanders and Sanders have suggested this was not an efficient system, explaining why many exhibitors chose to use a form of portable cart. Sanders and Sanders, *The American Drive-In Theater*, 78.

<sup>773</sup> Speed-Scoop, 'Speed-Scoop Advertisement', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 54:5, December 4, 1948, 18.

development of several new types of popcorn bags. Introduced in 1952, 'Pop-Set' was one example of this. It was not massively revolutionary but instead was a development of the traditional popcorn box, making it more efficient. Its unique selling point was the speed with which the box could be assembled, as a piece in *Motion Picture Daily* described: 'The box is designed to allow the operator to pop it open and scoop it full of hot popcorn in a single motion for fast service during rush periods.'<sup>774</sup> Another variation of the popcorn bag was an insulated bag produced by the Rex Speciality Bag Corporation. The bags were lined with aluminium foil which meant that popcorn would stay warm and crisp, enabling popcorn to be pre-packaged ahead of the intermission rush.<sup>775</sup> Despite their different unique selling points, both of these products were designed specifically to maximise efficiency and help to ensure that concession stands (at both outdoor movie-theatres but also indoors) worked to their full capacity during the intermission rush.

While products like the Speed-Scoop and Pop-Set seem fairly insignificant, the emergence of products like this was a reaction to the increasing importance of efficiency. This was of growing importance as the period progressed because the drive-in theatre demonstrated that efficiency was key to maximising profits. These developments were also symptomatic of wider changes within the concession industry. By 1949 concession equipment manufacturers and suppliers had realised the true potential of the drive-in market. This was reflected in the technology being produced throughout the 1950s, which was increasingly designed and targeted specifically at the drive-in theatre.

The self-service nature of the cafeteria system made it a good environment for exhibitors to trial new concession equipment. An article in *Theatre Catalog* helps to explain this:

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<sup>774</sup> Ray Gallo, 'In the Theatre Equipment World', *Motion Picture Daily*, 72:73, October 14, 1952, 4.

<sup>775</sup> Ray Gallo, 'In the Theatre Equipment World', *Motion Picture Daily*, 75:44, March 8, 1954, 5.

As a general rule, a cafeteria system lends itself to the introduction of new items better with less confusion and more profit than any other type. A station system ... is limited in the number of items that any one human being can efficiently collect, serve, and handle, but a cafeteria system has no such limitations.<sup>776</sup>

As previously noted, the station system was static. Staff needed to be well-trained in all aspects of refreshment preparation, including machine operation, in order to be able to fulfil customers' orders. It was not a serving system that was compatible with the trialling of new machines or menu expansion. Reliant on self-service and preparation, the cafeteria system, in contrast, could handle variation and change. New machines could easily be incorporated into the food station layout. The emphasis on preparation also meant that the new menu items did not put a strain on service during the intermission period. It is important to note that this influx of new concession technology from 1949 onwards was designed to work in tandem with the cafeteria system. Many of these machines incorporated elements, such as warming ovens, in order to keep pre-prepared foods warm or open displays for pre-boxed items. As the period progressed, additional products emerged to ease the addition of these machines to the refreshment operation. Introduced in 1953, the 'Hot Cup Timer' was a device within this vein. Designed specifically for drive-in theatres, the Hot Cup Timer was a 'device [that] can be set for any time ... When the warming time is up, a bell rings to notify the operator; and current cuts off to prevent overheating and eliminate scorched and wasted food and drinks.'<sup>777</sup> Analysing the drive-ins' concession operation, it is clear that from 1949 concession companies were tailoring their machines to suit the drive-in theatre's needs.

Its unique movie-going experience gave the drive-in theatre greater freedom to experiment. Using the car as the auditorium freed it from the problems that plagued

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<sup>776</sup> Lowe, 'Cafeteria Systems for Drive-Ins', 230-231.

<sup>777</sup> Ray Gallo, 'In the Theatre Equipment World', *Motion Picture Daily*, 74:14, July 21, 1953, 7.

conventional indoor movie-theatres. Unaffected by concerns about mess or the potential disturbance to audiences, drive-in theatre operators did not need to limit their refreshment menu. While popcorn remained the most popular item throughout the 1950s, the need to offer variety became increasingly pertinent as its audience began to expect more. The growing market of concession-related technology facilitated this. From 1949 onwards, *The Modern Theatre* encouraged exhibitors to experiment and offer greater variety:

a drive-in must carry a much wider variety of food and drinks than is usually found in the neighbourhood or suburban houses ... In addition to cold drinks to meet all tastes, ...[it] must provide ice cream, candy bars, hot dogs on buns, white or rye bread and perhaps other types of sandwiches.<sup>778</sup>

Listed here is a small selection of the most successful additions introduced during the early 1950s. As time progressed this list grew longer but also more eclectic, as regional favourites and exotic foods entered the drive-in theatre. The following section will discuss some of these new refreshments, as well as the concession technology used to prepare and serve them.

### **iii. Expanding the Menu**

Arguably the most successful item to be incorporated from 1950 into the drive-in theatre menu was the hot dog. By 1955, it ranked as its second best-selling item after popcorn.<sup>779</sup>

Unlike a lot of the new refreshments trialled during the early 1950s, the hot dog had near-universal appeal. What exhibitors found, however, was that they did particularly well in areas with high levels of blue-collar workers.<sup>780</sup> After a long day at work, the drive-in theatre was a

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<sup>778</sup> David F. Barrett, 'Wider Variety Required at Drive-Ins', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 54:14, February 5, 1949, 29.

<sup>779</sup> Anon., 'Hot Dogs Rank Second To Popcorn in Cleveland', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 66:19, March 5, 1955, 22.

<sup>780</sup> Albert H. Reynolds, 'Some Things We Have Learned About Operating Drive-In Concessions', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 61:6, June 7, 1952, 31; Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters*, 95.

relatively cheap source of entertainment for low-wage earners to enjoy, especially as they could eat dinner there. The hot dog's popularity encouraged exhibitors to trial other hot foods to capitalise upon this. For 90 cents, customers at the Tropicaire Drive-In in Coral Gables, Florida, had three different combo meal options: fried shrimp, fried chicken, or steak (all served with French fries and condiments).<sup>781</sup> The Tropicaire was not alone, because by 1953 complete meals were available at most drive-in theatres. Convenient and inexpensive, they were a lucrative addition to the menu – attractive to blue-collar workers and young families alike.

In line with this, drive-in theatres also began to experiment with introducing a variety of drink sizes. Traditionally at both the indoor and drive-in theatres drinks came in one standard serving size, priced at 10 cents in 1951.<sup>782</sup> A slightly larger 20 cents option began to be offered, but that was further superseded by the introduction of the 24-ounce supersize option priced at 30 cents.<sup>783</sup> Originally trialled at drive-in theatres in 1954, the supersize proved wildly popular with movie-goers. The Ezell Circuit claimed that the supersize accounted for 25 to 30 percent of its beverage sales by October 1954.<sup>784</sup> Not only was the 30 cents size popular in its own right but many exhibitors, including Philip L. Lowe, owner of the Meadow Glen drive-in theatre in Medford, Massachusetts, believed it promoted sales of the 20 cent drink: 'The average person ... is inclined to take the average size offered. If a soft drink is available in 10c or 20c size only, he is likely to take the dime cup. But if there are three sizes, say 10c, 20c and 30c, the chances are he'll take the 20c one.'<sup>785</sup> A simple

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<sup>781</sup> Anon., 'Concession Promotions That Have Paid Off', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 63:19, September 5, 1953, 9.

<sup>782</sup> Anon., 'North, East, South and West – Theatremen Say, "Beverages Pay"', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 60:6, December 8, 1951, 10.

<sup>783</sup> Anon., 'Introducing 30c Drink Boosts 20c-Size Sales', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Refreshment Merchandising*, 199:11, June 11, 1955, 1-R.

<sup>784</sup> Frank Bradley, 'King-Size Drink Making Record Sales', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 65:23, October 2, 1954, 14.

<sup>785</sup> Anon., 'Introducing 30c Drink Boosts 20c-Size Sales', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Refreshment Merchandising*, 199:11, June 11, 1955, 1-R.

addition to the concession stand menu, the drive-in theatres' willingness to trial a variation in soda size and price was a clever development. Complementary to other initiatives, namely combo deals, it offered a template for the practices that would become central to the concession stand model used at the modern multiplex.

Fried foods did well, but the hot dog remained the most popular item. In 1954 alone, over 172 million were consumed at America's drive-in theatres.<sup>786</sup> The biggest consideration exhibitors faced in regard to it, however, was the method of preparation: steamed or grilled. During the early 1950s equipment developed to support both methods, though the industry was divided over which was best. Using steam to cook the wieners, the primary advantage of the hot dog steamer was that it could prepare large quantities of wieners thirty minutes in advance. One drive-in theatre which used this method was the Aurora Drive-In near Seattle, Washington.<sup>787</sup> After analysing their concession trade, management determined that properly to prepare for the intermission rush it was best to pre-prepare 15 hot dogs per 100 cars.<sup>788</sup> On busy nights when demand was greater, more wieners could quickly be cooked to order. Any leftovers could be refrigerated and used the following day. The Ezell Drive-In Circuit was also a proponent of the hot dog steamer. Reynolds favoured this method because steaming made the wiener swell, and therefore, look bigger and more appetising.<sup>789</sup>

Not all exhibitors agreed, however, with many instead favouring the hot dog grill. Rather than steaming or boiling the wiener, this method grilled it using a rotisserie system. An article in *The Modern Theatre* suggested that 'good display is an important factor in selling hot dogs. Rotating grills ... are excellent merchandising aids'.<sup>790</sup> In a similar manner

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<sup>786</sup> Anon., 'Hot Dogs... They've Made the Movie Big Time', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 66:19, March 5, 1955, 19.

<sup>787</sup> Blood, 'Station System Refreshment Vending', 224.

<sup>788</sup> Anon., 'Speed Sells 'Em'', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 59:14, August 4, 1951, 37.

<sup>789</sup> Albert H. Reynolds, 'Some Things We Have Learned About Operating Drive-In Concessions', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 61:6, June 7, 1952, 30.

<sup>790</sup> Anon., 'Hot Tips on Merchandising Hot Dogs', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 67:2, May 7, 1955, 33.

to the popcorn machine's use of sensory spectacle, it was thought hot dog sales would increase if customers witnessed them cooking. Throughout the 1950s this method of merchandising was commonplace at the drive-in theatre, as the 'eye appeal' of cooking foods was considered an easy and effective method of promotion.<sup>791</sup> Used in conjunction with a bun warmer (another standard piece of drive-in equipment), the Servemaster Roto Grille Hot Dog Broiler was transparent so that customers could see the wieners rotating as they cooked.<sup>792</sup> Eye appeal was one advantage that the grill had over the steamer, but many exhibitors also believed that it produced a better-quality product. *The Modern Theatre's* advice columnist George M. Petersen, an experienced drive-in operator, gave the following response when asked the question of grill versus steamer: 'A small minority ... use steamed, or boiled wieners. The great majority, especially the better type of concessions, provide grilled wieners. The steamed dogs are cheaper to prepare but the grilled product is much more appetizing ...'<sup>793</sup> Petersen was a proponent of the hot dog grill, but he acknowledged there were benefits to both methods. His answer is useful because it demonstrates that there was no generally accepted 'correct' method. Like many of the issues relating to concession equipment and operation practise more generally, it was subjective. *The Modern Theatre* and its experts could offer advice, but ultimately it was up to individuals to choose the method which suited them best. It is worth noting here that, at the vast majority of drive-in theatres, it was exhibitors or in-house management that controlled all aspects of the concession stand. Only a very small percentage – reportedly 13 percent in 1950, a figure which had dropped to 10 percent later in the decade – employed a concessionaire to run their refreshment

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<sup>791</sup> Anon., 'Refreshment Manual: The ABC's of Drive-In Concessions', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 64:23, April 3, 1954, 28.

<sup>792</sup> Hollywood Servemaster Company, 'Miscellaneous Servemaster Equipment Advertisement', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 66:19, March 5, 1955, 21.

<sup>793</sup> George M. Petersen, 'The Drive-In Question Corner', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 58:14, February 3, 1951, 23.

operation.<sup>794</sup> This meant that the majority of drive-in theatre exhibitors retained all refreshment profits themselves.

As well as encouraging exhibitors to trial other hot foods, hot dogs also encouraged add-on purchases. Typically sold with ketchup and mustard at no additional cost, several new variations began to be offered, the most popular being the chilli dog, a hot dog covered with chilli (another item introduced to the drive-in in the 1950s). Using items readily available at the concession stand, this was an easy addition to the menu. Chilli was one example, but other variations included fried onions and sauerkraut.<sup>795</sup> The additional toppings meant that exhibitors could charge a higher price, despite it not costing that much more to produce. In a 1955 advertisement for canned chilli, Castleberry (a supplier of concession-related products) claimed that chilli dogs could easily be sold for 5 cents more than the normal hot dog – resulting in a profit of 4 cents for the exhibitor.<sup>796</sup> Hot dogs also promoted soft drink sales because, like popcorn, they had a tendency to make people thirsty.<sup>797</sup> One movie-theatre claimed that 90 percent of customers who bought a hot dog also purchased a drink, the most popular choices being Coca-Cola and coffee.<sup>798</sup> A successful item by themselves, hot dogs demonstrated how add-on purchases could easily be incorporated into the menu. For very little effort or additional cost, exhibitors had the means to cultivate higher profit sales.

‘A definite “must”’, according to one *Theatre Catalog* columnist, ice cream was another refreshment that thrived at the outdoor movie-theatre from 1949.<sup>799</sup> Throughout the 1950s, popcorn remained the top-selling item, but sales tended to drop off in the summer

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<sup>794</sup> Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters*, 96.

<sup>795</sup> Anon., ‘Hot Tips on Merchandising Hot Dogs’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 67:2, May 7, 1955, 33.

<sup>796</sup> Castleberry’s Food Co., ‘Hot Dog Chili Advertisement’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 67:2, May 7, 1955, 37.

<sup>797</sup> Anon., ‘Hot Tips on Merchandising Hot Dogs’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 67:2, May 7, 1955, 33.

<sup>798</sup> I. L. Thatcher, ‘Skillful Popping Technique Aids in Achieving Greater Net Profit Per Patron on Popcorn’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 60:6, December 8, 1951, 14.

<sup>799</sup> Lowe, ‘Cafeteria Systems for Drive-Ins’, 229.

months.<sup>800</sup> Needing a substitute to make up for this loss, ice cream was the logical solution. Incredibly popular with audiences, it quickly established itself as a successful movie-time treat. Advances in ice cream machines and dispensers meant that movie-goers had access to a selection of products, specifically ice lollies and soft-serve ice cream. At the drive-in theatre, ice lollies and packaged ice cream bars were sold from deep chest freezers and cabinets. The Icecreamolator, for example, was a popular display cabinet in use during the period. Able to hold 120 ice lollies, advertisements for the product emphasised its use of lights and colour to attract sales.<sup>801</sup> Considering that the concession stand's target audience here was children, using spectacle to draw attention was a sensible merchandising decision, one which the machine's manufacturers claimed could potentially triple profits. It was well suited to the cafeteria system. Requiring no supervision and with an open display, people could help themselves to items, which was also a factor proven to increase sales.<sup>802</sup> Pre-packaged ice lollies and choc ices sold well, but children themselves tended to favour soft-serve ice cream.<sup>803</sup>

Soft-serve ice cream, or frozen custard as it was also known, was not technically ice cream. It did not contain the correct amount of butterfat to qualify, meaning that it had a slightly different consistency.<sup>804</sup> Just as delicious, frozen custard became an extremely popular item at the drive-in theatre. Various soft-serve machines were available, though the most popular manufacturer throughout the 1950s was Sweden Freezer. Specialising in counter models, these machines were convenient and easy to use. Advertisements for the company's machines emphasised their ability to operate at high volume levels, which was

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<sup>800</sup> Clarence A. Bauer, 'How I Maintain Year-Round Profit by Selling Soft Ice Cream', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 55:14, August 6, 1949, 6.

<sup>801</sup> National Theatre Supply, 'Icecreamolator Advertisement', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 55:14, August 6, 1949, 9.

<sup>802</sup> Anon., 'Self-Service Increases Sales', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 65:10, July 3, 1954, 35.

<sup>803</sup> Clarence A. Bauer, 'How I Maintain Year-Round Profit by Selling Soft Ice Cream', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 55:14, August 6, 1949, 7.

<sup>804</sup> *Ibid.*

crucial for the intermission rush.<sup>805</sup> Unlike ice lollies and packaged ice creams, frozen custard was a product that had eye appeal. Customers could see it being dispensed, a spectacle many exhibitors believed generated extra sales. According to *The Modern Theatre*, an exhibitor could expect to make between \$10-\$30 profit per day selling frozen custard.<sup>806</sup> A high profit item, by 1951 it accounted for 9 percent of the drive-in's refreshment sales.<sup>807</sup> Not only a top-selling item at the drive-in, soft-serve ice cream shared another similarity to the hot dog. Both refreshments successfully transitioned into the indoor movie-theatre during the 1950s.

Hoping to replicate the success of the drive-in theatre, indoor movie-theatres of all sizes – both small independents and large chains – incorporated these two refreshments into their concession stands. Despite initially hesitancy and concerns, many exhibitors found that the potential mess associated with these foods was not as bad as first feared. Discussing the introduction of ice cream, the manager of the Avenue Theatre in Yakima, Washington, said that: ‘some of the ice cream drips on the floor, but ... it has been a simple matter to clean it up, and there has been no evidence of a “messy” house as a result of the sales.’<sup>808</sup> Since the 1920s, indoor exhibitors had been concerned about refreshments ruining a movie-theatre's interior, specifically the carpet and furnishings. These fears had lessened over time as popcorn and candy entered the auditorium, but ice cream and hot dogs were the ultimate test. Sticky and messy to eat, the threat these foods posed was initially thought immense. As the Avenue Theatre found, however, the mess was minimal. The growing popularity and profit-making potential of these refreshments more than made up for the minimal cleaning costs.

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<sup>805</sup> Sweden Freezer Mfg. Co., ‘Ice Cream Machine Advertisement’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 56:18, March 4, 1950, 43.

<sup>806</sup> Anon., ‘High Gross Profit Produced By Sale Of Soft Ice Cream’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 67:2, May 7, 1955, 20.

<sup>807</sup> Anon., ‘A Frozen Theatre Delicacy With A Fine Profit Flavor’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 58:18, March 3, 1951, 28.

<sup>808</sup> Gibbons Clark, ‘Refreshment Vending A Fine Art at Yakima's Sparkling Avenue Theatre’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 55:22, October 1, 1949, 17, 24.

According to a survey conducted by *The Modern Theatre* in 1951, over a third of indoor movie-theatres sold ice cream in some form (most commonly, ice lollies and choc ices).<sup>809</sup> This was not a static figure but one that was continuously rising, encouraged by the huge success exhibitors were having. Ice cream's success was not isolated, but was also paralleled by the hot dog. In 1951, the State Theatre in Mason City, Iowa, trialled hot dogs at its concession stand. This was a decision which was an instantaneous success; there was such a high demand that the State regularly ran out of stock at the weekend.<sup>810</sup> This was a situation reflected in indoor movie-theatres across America. As indoor audiences also developed a taste for these items, the demand for these refreshments escalated. While hot dogs and ice cream successfully transitioned into the indoor movie-theatre, they were the anomalies. Between 1949 and 1955 a slew of new refreshments entered the drive-in theatre. Encountering differing levels of success with outdoor audiences, the vast majority of these new refreshments proved too exotic to be sold in conventional indoor movie-theatres.

As the 1950s progressed, the refreshments which entered the drive-in theatre deviated from the typical movie-theatre mainstays. Previous success with ice cream and hot dogs demonstrated that there was a market, exhibitors just needed to find the correct items, a process that involved considerable trial and error. The first flurry of refreshments introduced between 1949 and 1952 were sensible additions. New items that would already be familiar to audiences that were introduced at this time included: French fries, snow cones, malted milkshakes, hamburgers, and a variety of deep fat fried foods. All of these refreshments integrated well, complementing items already on the menu. French fries are a good example of this. As previously discussed, the hot dog's success prompted exhibitors to expand into

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<sup>809</sup> Nevin I. Gage, 'One-Third of All Indoor Theatres Now Sell Ice Cream', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 60:6, December 8, 1951, 20.

<sup>810</sup> Anon., 'The Hot Dog Provides New Profits For the Indoor Concession Counter', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 58:14, February 3, 1951, 36.

other hot foods, for example, fried chicken or shrimp. This in turn led them to offer French fries, an add-on purchase which transformed a hot dog or hamburger into a complete meal.<sup>811</sup>

While the first wave of new items integrated easily into the existing menu, the second wave was a bit more unusual. Discussing the evolution of the drive-in theatres' menu in 1954, *The Modern Theatre* commented that:

The refreshment stand at the outdoor theatre, which was strictly a hot dog and candy, popcorn and soda pop operation in its earliest days, and more recently expanded into fried chicken, French-fried shrimp, barbequed ribs ... is now acquiring a more exotic selection of foods with which to lure patrons to the concessions counter at the refreshment breaks.<sup>812</sup>

'Exotic' is an apt description for the refreshments introduced from 1953. No longer just pushing the boundaries of movie-time refreshments, the drive-in theatre was rewriting the rule book. The list of refreshments introduced at this time is substantial, but included: doughnuts, candy floss, Chinese egg rolls, and pizza. Advertisements for popcorn, soda, and miscellaneous concession stand supplies had dominated the pages of *Boxoffice* in the preceding years. Although they were still prolific, by 1955 there was a noticeable increase in advertisements for a wide array of more exotic foods, as Figure 7 illustrates. Exhibitors were drawn to the idea of an eclectic selection of refreshments because of their high mark-ups. Candy and popcorn dominated the concession stand but were small-ticket items; in contrast, these new refreshments offered big returns. Pizza, for example, cost roughly 20 cents to make but could be sold for between 60 cents to one dollar, depending on location.<sup>813</sup>

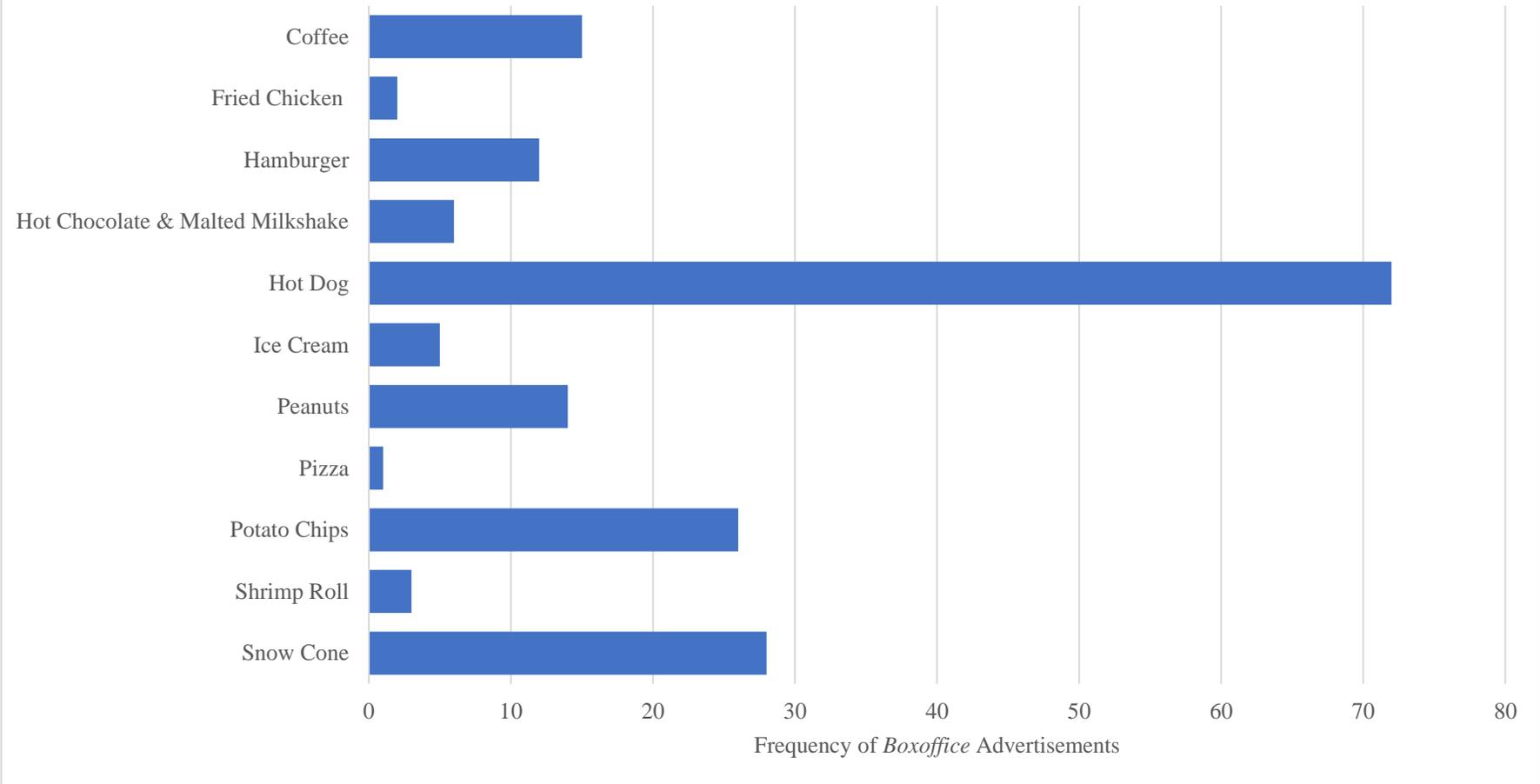
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<sup>811</sup> Anon., 'Three Well-Equipped Concession Bars', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 54:14, February 5, 1949, 30.

<sup>812</sup> Anon., 'Chinese Egg Rolls, Pizza Pies Show Up at Drive-In Counters', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 64:15, February 6, 1954, 56.

<sup>813</sup> Anon., 'The Big-Ticket Concessions Item Catches On', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 66:2, November 6, 1954, 23.

Figure 7: A breakdown of the new refreshment items available on the concession industry market, and the frequency of *Boxoffice* advertisements promoting them in 1955.



Data compiled from analysis of all issues of *Boxoffice* in 1955.

Unknown when first introduced to the concession stand, many of these refreshments quickly proved their worth. Chinese egg rolls, for example, were an instantaneous success. A best-selling item across America, movie-goers consumed them in large quantities. One drive-in theatre in Long Island, New York was reportedly selling 2,000 per week in 1953.<sup>814</sup> Easy to prepare (they arrived pre-cooked so simply needed warming in a grill or fryer), exhibitors easily kept up with the heavy demand during the intermission period. Despite not being able to explain the source of its popularity, they were pleasantly surprised by its success. Pizza was another item which succeeded at the drive-in theatre by 1955, though its popularity was not as instantaneous.

Very much ‘a new discovery’, it was at the drive-in that the vast majority of the American public first encountered pizza.<sup>815</sup> Initially introduced in 1951, it proved successful on the East Coast where there was a large Italian population. It failed, however, to catch on universally. Foreign to the vast majority of Americans, many exhibitors were sceptical about it. Discussing the trialling of new refreshments in 1954, Albert Reynolds said that pizza was an item that many exhibitors in the southwest shied away from.<sup>816</sup> This situation began to change by 1955, however, as the American public started to develop a taste for pizza. After a gradual expansion into drive-in theatres nationwide, pizza became a top-selling item. One drive-in reportedly sold 1,000 per week.<sup>817</sup> Sold per slice but also as a complete pizza, it appealed to families or blue-collar workers looking for their evening meal. It was an investment, but the profit-making potential convinced many exhibitors to take the risk. With

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<sup>814</sup> Anon., ‘Chinese Egg Rolls, Pizza Pies Show Up at Drive-In Counters’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 64:15, February 6, 1954, 56.

<sup>815</sup> Anon., ‘Added Profits of Drive-in Delicacy Now Available on National Scale’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 58:23, April 7, 1951, 36. See also: Sanders and Sanders, *The American Drive-In Movie Theater*, 81.

<sup>816</sup> Frank Bradley, ‘King-Size Drink Making Record Sales’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 65:23, October 2, 1954, 14.

<sup>817</sup> Anon., ‘Chinese Egg Rolls, Pizza Pies Show Up at Drive-In Counters’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 64:15, February 6, 1954, 56.

a profit margin of around 70 percent, pizza was one of the most profitable hot food items on the menu by 1955.<sup>818</sup>

Pizza was also introduced because exhibitors hoped that it would tap into the take-home market. Rather than buying a slice, exhibitors encouraged patrons to buy a whole pizza (at greater expense) with the encouragement that whatever was not eaten could be finished at home. Other refreshments were also marketed in this way, for example quarts of ice cream, as exhibitors attempted to create greater sales. The most successful take-home item, however, was doughnuts, typically sold by the dozen. The Trail Drive-In Theatre in Houston, Texas, (the first to sell doughnuts) estimated that 65 percent of doughnut sales was the result of people buying ‘a dozen or two after the show to have for breakfast the next morning’.<sup>819</sup> Branching into the take-home market was a clever business decision, and by 1955 over 1,200 drive-in theatres were offering doughnuts. Of the exotic items introduced to the drive-in theatre, pizza, Chinese egg rolls, and doughnuts were among the most popular, hence the focus on them here. The trade press vocally encouraged exhibitors to experiment, but were also clear on the dangers of offering too great a choice.

The success of a drive-in theatre’s menu walked a very fine line. Not enough variety and customers were dissatisfied, but too much and the entire concession operation was threatened. *The Modern Theatre* regularly reiterated the pitfalls of overcrowding the menu, especially as the number of refreshments available on the market grew. It is clear from analysing articles in this publication that, throughout the 1950s, regional tastes and preferences developed. John Link, the manager of a drive-in theatre concession stand in Alabama, provided the following advice to readers: ‘We believe a most important factor in all concession operations is community tastes, with respect to likes and dislikes. They will

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<sup>818</sup> Philip L. Lowe, ‘Pizza’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 67:6, June 4, 1955, 37-38.

<sup>819</sup> Anon., ‘Doughnuts: A Hole-in-One For the Concessions Dollar at Drive-In’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 67:23, October 1, 1955, 20.

largely determine the items that can be handled successfully.<sup>820</sup> As Link suggested, different regions were developing different tastes. Pizza is one example of this, but there are many others. Snow cones, for example, were popular in Texas, whereas audiences in Minnesota preferred frozen custard.<sup>821</sup> Audiences in New England favoured shrimp and clams, whereas pickles were a firm favourite of movie-goers in Oklahoma.<sup>822</sup> These regional tastes did not only apply to the new, exotic foods but also to some extent to concession stand mainstays. Andrew Krappman, the candy department head at National Theatre, declared in 1954 that ‘candy is the best refreshment seller in California, popcorn in the Midwest, and ice cream in Wisconsin.’<sup>823</sup>

Exhibitors had to be aware of these preferences in order properly to cater to the needs of their audience. They gained nothing by including items on the menu that would not sell. Not only did they take up space, but concession equipment and supplies were an expensive investment. This is why *The Modern Theatre* encouraged exhibitors to trial new refreshment items first. In doing so, they could monitor sales and see what sold well. This information could then be used to decide which items to incorporate into the menu permanently – a process that was aided by concessionaries, as exhibitors had the option initially to lease the equipment and assess sales before fully committing to purchase expensive equipment. The Town Theatre in Detroit, Michigan, is a prime example of a drive-in which regulated its menu in this way. As *The Modern Theatre* observed:

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<sup>820</sup> John L. Link, ‘Popcorn at Boxoffice Creates Plus Sales’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 67:10, July 2, 1955, 32, 34.

<sup>821</sup> Albert H. Reynolds, ‘Some Things We Have Learned About Operating Drive-In Concessions’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 61:6, June 7, 1952, 32; Anon., ‘Frozen Custard Proves to Be A Consistent Year-Around Profit-Maker Up North’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 64:11, January 9, 1954, 27.

<sup>822</sup> Anon., ‘Concession Promotions That Have Paid Off’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 63:19, September 5, 1953, 8; Anon., ‘Now It’s Pickles As a Concession’, *Motion Picture Daily*, 76:92, November 12, 1954, 3.

<sup>823</sup> Anon., ‘Rhoden, at N. T. Conclave, Outlines 4-Point Program’, *Motion Picture Daily*, 76:103, November 30, 1954, 8.

The basic menu at the Town is occasionally revised as experience warrants. If a call is received for something that is not stocked, the item is checked and potential demand estimated. If a real demand is found, it is added to the menu. A typical example was the recent addition of French fried potatoes.<sup>824</sup>

The Town operated a restricted menu, offering all the movie-theatre mainstays but only selling 4 to 5 of the new exotic items. Hot dogs, for example, were the only meat-based item it sold, because it was a proven money-maker.<sup>825</sup> Restricting the menu in this way was not a disadvantage; in fact, it was smart management.

Overcrowding the menu, even with foods that sold well, was a bad idea. Faced with too much choice, customers could become overwhelmed and indecisive. This slowed down service and could also negatively impact sales. The sight of hot dogs cooking and the smell of fresh popcorn were an exhibitor's best promotional tools, capturing customers' attention and appealing to their senses – a very successful method of generating sales. Impulse was key to a concession stand's success, but this could easily be ruined by overstocking the menu. An article in *The Modern Theatre* discussed this subject, noting the following about the flimsy nature of impulse purchases:

The impulse to buy is a delicate thing, easy to arouse – by a split second ... a sight, a sound, a smell, the barest suggestion, sometimes – but just as easy to kill. Too often, allowing or forcing the customer to hesitate, once his delicate impulse has been aroused, can be fatal to the impulse.<sup>826</sup>

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<sup>824</sup> Haviland F. Reves, 'Detroit Drive-In Refreshment Service Good Example of Sound Operation', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 55:18, September 3, 1949, 30.

<sup>825</sup> Ibid.

<sup>826</sup> Daniel A. Nidess, 'Stimulate Patron's Buying Impulse By Exploiting Fewer Varieties', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 63:14, August 1, 1953, 32.

The sensory spectacle of the concession stand meant that impulse purchases were easy to cultivate, but also just as easy to destroy. As the article suggests, offering too much choice stifled impulse purchases. Exposed to more items and options, customers were forced to think more deeply about what they wanted. Purchasing was no longer based purely on impulse, but instead became more calculated. Customers became more aware of the price of the refreshments on their trays, which could be detrimental to sales. It was for these reasons that many drive-ins began to restrict their menus during the 1950s. The Ezell Drive-In circuit, for example, limited the number of soft drinks it offered because it took customers too long to decide otherwise.<sup>827</sup>

By the mid-1950s, the drive-in theatre's concession stand was run as a careful balancing act. New refreshments needed to be trialled to keep up with trends and satiate movie-goers' appetites, but exhibitors needed to be careful not to overwhelm them with options. The key to achieving this relied on careful monitoring of sales, gathering information that informed the exhibitors' decisions regarding their menu. Concessionaires aided this process, as previously discussed, supplying and servicing the concession equipment. Given how profitable the drive-in theatres' concession stand was, however, the majority of exhibitors chose to manage their refreshment operation themselves in-house, rather than rent it to a third party. Segrave estimates that, by the 1950s, only 10 percent of drive-in theatre concession stands were managed day-to-day by a concessionaire company.<sup>828</sup>

#### **iv. Intermission Trailers**

As discussed in chapter three, intermissions had been (re)introduced to the American movie-theatre in the early 1940s, following the release of *Gone with the Wind*. Indoor exhibitors had

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<sup>827</sup> Albert H. Reynolds, 'Some Things We Have Learned About Operating Drive-In Concessions', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 61:6, June 7, 1952, 30.

<sup>828</sup> Segrave, *Drive-In Theaters*, 76.

been quick to realise the potential that this five- or ten-minute period had, and had begun effectively to use the intermission to boost concession stand sales. Some exhibitors had even begun to use screen announcements (single frame advertisements projected on the screen) during the intermission. One example from 1941 informed movie-goers that ‘Patrons wishing a refreshment during or after the performance will find candy, popcorn and a cold drink of Cola available for their convenience in (indicate location).’<sup>829</sup> Like its indoor counterpart, the drive-in theatre’s intermission period was typically ten-minutes long. In *Better Theatre*’s 1953 annual concession stand survey, it was reported that 58 percent had an intermission of this length, while 20 percent opted for 15-minutes.<sup>830</sup> With approximately 75 percent of their refreshment sales occurring during this time, it was critical that outdoor exhibitors capitalise upon the intermission.<sup>831</sup>

The developments discussed above ensured that the drive-in theatre concession stand was able comfortably to cater for the intermission rush. A new layout geared towards speed and efficiency, as well as considerable expansion in both equipment and menu, were key factors in achieving this. There was one further component to the outdoor exhibition model’s success, however. Unlike its indoor equivalent, the drive-in theatre made effective use of promotional materials, specifically short advertising trailers. Its most prominent feature, the screen, was the drive-in theatre’s best asset. ‘The most obvious advertising medium to promote the theatre concession stand,’ declared the editor of *The Modern Theatre*, ‘is the screen, and regular use of concession trailers will keep the cash register at the concession ringing merrily.’<sup>832</sup> Operators of drive-in theatres evidently agreed with this advice. A survey

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<sup>829</sup> Anon., ‘Beverage Vending, and Refreshment Sales Promotion’, *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 143:1, April 5, 1941, 26.

<sup>830</sup> According to the survey, the rest ran a variety of intermission times ranging from between 5 to 12 minutes. Anon., ‘1953 Poll on Vending Moves Popcorn to Top’, *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 190:12, March 21, 1953, 34; Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters*, 93-94.

<sup>831</sup> Frances Harding, ‘Cafeteria Service Spells CASH at the Drive-in’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 59:10, July 7, 1951, 33.

<sup>832</sup> I. L. Thatcher, ‘Editor’s Letter’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 61:1, May 3, 1952, 7.

undertaken by the same publication in February 1952 reported that 83 percent were using promotional trailers, in contrast to just 30 percent of indoor cinemas.<sup>833</sup>

Short, colourful, and often accompanied by a catchy jingle, drive-in theatres used a range of intermission trailers to showcase their extensive refreshment menu.<sup>834</sup> *The Modern Theatre* offered an in-depth analysis of one popular form of intermission trailer:

One of the popcorn-selling trailers opens with the entire screen filled with popcorn. This is followed by an extreme closeup of an attractive woman eating popcorn. The camera pans to a small boy, also eating popcorn. The boy looks at the camera, winks and grins to show his enjoyment. The playlet [trailer] ends with an attractive display of various kinds of today's most popular candy bars. The announcer reads: 'Does crunchy, appetizing popcorn bring your taste buds to life? Try ours ... And popcorn isn't all this theatre has for your enjoyment. Look at these delectable candy bars.'<sup>835</sup>

Generic and unbranded, this trailer template was easily adaptable to advertise other concession items, for example, soda. Its key function was to highlight the variety of refreshments on offer. Other variations of this type of trailer featured the typical all-American family.<sup>836</sup> Following as they purchased and enjoyed drive-in delicacies, like pizza or hot dogs, it highlighted the key selling points of the refreshments on offer: that they were freshly prepared, of good quality, and had great taste. Aimed at encouraging families to eat their dinners on site, these were all factors that would have appealed to parents.<sup>837</sup> In an attempt to

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<sup>833</sup> Nevin I. Gage, 'Average Drive-In's Concession Gross Is Nearly Fifty Per Cent of the Ticket Dollar', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 60:14, February 2, 1952, 32.

<sup>834</sup> The intermission trailers used by drive-in theatres tended to be silent, played with an accompanying musical track. In contrast, the trailers used at indoor movie-theatres were sound, typically with voiceovers selling the products. Haviland F. Reves, 'How to Use Your Screen To Increase Sales At Your Concession', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 61:1, May 3, 1952, 11.

<sup>835</sup> Anon., 'Promote Concession Sales With Screen Trailers', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 59:14, August 4, 1951, 39.

<sup>836</sup> Sanders and Sanders, *The American Drive-In Movie Theater*, 82.

<sup>837</sup> Segrave, *Drive-In Theaters*, 92, 95.

appeal specifically to mothers, who often controlled what families ate, it was not uncommon for trailers also to emphasise the nutritional value of the refreshment.<sup>838</sup> The most popular trailer variation, however, was the cartoon. Not just a source of amusement, animations of dancing popcorn buckets and French fries were cleverly designed to appeal to the drive-in's youngest patrons. Following close analysis of concession stand sales, it was widely known by the 1950s that children had a significant influence over parental spending.<sup>839</sup>

*The Modern Theatre*, writing in April 1950, reported that families with children spent considerably more than those without: 'Families with children spend an average of 32 cents a week for candy while those without children average only 18 cents a week, according to results of a recent survey of 1,558 typical households in 68 representative cities.'<sup>840</sup> Further evidence of this came in 1953 when Disney released a new feature film, *Peter Pan*. As a new release this was not the kind of film typically shown at a drive-in theatre, but a number of exhibitors went to great lengths to ensure that it was. To secure the right to show this film these drive-ins made a peculiar deal with its distributor: they would be allowed to screen *Peter Pan* but, instead of taking a percentage of the ticket sales, all box office profits would go to the distributor.<sup>841</sup> In making this bold move, the exhibitors were confident in their ability to recoup the lost ticket sales as well as make a tidy profit from refreshments alone. It was a risk that paid off. In the first week of showing *Peter Pan*, one drive-in theatre in Cleveland, Ohio, made \$10,000 solely from concession sales, the equivalent to an average week's box office profit.<sup>842</sup>

Several companies emerged in the early 1950s that specialised in producing and distributing intermission trailers, for both drive-ins and indoor movie-theatres. Based in

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<sup>838</sup> Anon., 'Exhibitors Can Sell More Popcorn By Promoting Its Food Value', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 60:23, April 5, 1952, 26.

<sup>839</sup> Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters*, 92.

<sup>840</sup> Anon., 'Where the Candy Money Goes', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 56:22, April 1, 1950, 50.

<sup>841</sup> Anon., 'Offers 100% Deal For "Peter Pan"', *Motion Picture Daily*, 73:33, February 18, 1953, 1.

<sup>842</sup> Anon., "'Pan" Pulls \$10,000 In Candy Sales', *Motion Picture Daily*, 73:45, March 9, 1953, 4.

Chicago, Filmack was one such company. While some companies allowed exhibitors to submit their own copy to be used in the trailer, Filmack regularly issued a catalogue that exhibitors could purchase stock trailers from.<sup>843</sup> With trailers available for the complete concession stand menu, stock trailers tended to be largely unbranded.<sup>844</sup> Any drive-in could show this type of trailer regardless of the specific brand of refreshments that they sold. Trailers were available for the concession staples, like popcorn and soda, but exhibitors tended to focus greater attention on promoting the more exotic foods on offer.<sup>845</sup> Less familiar in many indoor movie-theatres, short trailers proved an effective means of selling newer concession items at drive-ins.

Filmack also boasted a high turnout of trailers for the intermission (undoubtedly aided by the generic nature of their advertisements). This was necessary because, according to *The Modern Theatre*, it was essential that exhibitors not overplay the usage of such trailers. Discussing the practices of the Community Theatres, a chain of drive-ins operating throughout Detroit, Michigan, the publication advised:

Variety and lack of monotony are key points here. The circuit has a set of four different trailers, which are rotated between its various drive-ins. Each is run for about 30 days in succession – then it is felt to be time to change. Thus, each trailer should have a maximum of two runs a season in each theatre.<sup>846</sup>

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<sup>843</sup> Haviland F. Reves, 'How to Use Your Screen To Increase Sales At Your Concession', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 61:1, May 3, 1952, 12; Sanders and Sanders, *The American Drive-In Movie Theater*, 84.

<sup>844</sup> Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters*, 92.

<sup>845</sup> Anon., 'Promoting Food Specialties at Drive-In Theatres', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Refreshment Merchandising*, 200:1, July 2, 1955, 50.

<sup>846</sup> Haviland F. Reves, 'How to Use Your Screen To Increase Sales At Your Concession', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 61:1, May 3, 1952, 11.

To ensure the continued interest of patrons and avoid becoming monotonous, it was important that exhibitors regularly rotate the intermission trailers that they used.<sup>847</sup>

Companies like Filmack provided easy access to a wide catalogue of stock trailers but some well-known concession brands also provided promotional materials free of charge to those selling their products. Manley, Coca-Cola, and Pepsi all offered this service.<sup>848</sup> Having captured and subsequently dominated the American film exhibition market in the immediate post-war years, Coca-Cola was keen to maintain its position. One way of doing this was offering a high level of merchandising support to exhibitors, providing trailers upon request being one aspect of this.<sup>849</sup> In its December 1952 issue, *The Modern Theatre* analysed a Coca-Cola promotional trailer providing an in-depth breakdown of its six frames.<sup>850</sup> The trailer follows a uniformed usher as he informs movie-goers that ‘ice cold Coca-Cola is available in this theatre’, and encourages them to visit the concession stand during the intermission or after the show, to purchase a beverage. (The second frame links Coca-Cola with other concession staples, showing a glass of Coke alongside popcorn, candy, and an ice cream sandwich). Trailers of this type by well-known brands were a powerful promotional tool. Highly effective, they created a good balance with the more general stock trailers available from Filmack.

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<sup>847</sup> Anon., ‘Trailers Called One of Best Sales Stimulants’, *Motion Picture Herald: Better Refreshment Merchandising*, 195:11, June 12, 1954, 9-R.

<sup>848</sup> It was not just intermission trailers that were available to exhibitors but also a range of point-of-purchase merchandising. Coca-Cola, for example, provided posters, promotional displays, and illuminated signage which was used to decorate the concession stand and act as a stimulus for sales of Coca-Cola. The same applied to Manley, who also regularly issued new point-of-purchase signage to movie-theatres, especially around the major holidays. Anon., ‘Point-of-Sale Display Signs Available to Theatremen For Concession Stands’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 65:6, June 5, 1954, 43; Anon., ‘Promoting Refreshment Stand Products’, *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 198:13, March 26, 1955, 57; Anon., ‘Now! A New Merchandising Service from Manley’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 65:23, October 2, 1954, 22; Anon., ‘Trailer Helps Sell Popcorn’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 59:10, July 7, 1951, 40.

<sup>849</sup> Anon., ‘Exhibitors Size Up the Snack Bar’s Place and Needs’, *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 190:10, March 7, 1953, 9.

<sup>850</sup> Anon., ‘A Screen Trailer For Coca-Cola’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 62:6, December 6, 1952, 30.

Discussing the drive-in concession stand in 1955, *Theatre Catalog* deemed trailers and the intermission period ‘the greatest source of volume producers that can possibly be used today’.<sup>851</sup> The high percentage of drive-ins using trailers, reportedly 83 percent, indicates that *Theatre Catalog* was correct. *Better Theatre Merchandising*, itself an advocate of intermission trailers, detailed how these promotional materials had been an important topic of conversation at the International Popcorn Association’s annual conference in the spring of 1954. Already deemed an effective ‘sales stimulant,’ it was forecast by several prominent exhibition chains that intermission trailers – ‘one of the most effective media of theatre refreshment sales promotion’ – would become even more commonplace, at both outdoor and indoor movie-theatres.<sup>852</sup> The success being experienced by those that used them only served further to reinforce this belief. In April 1954, for example, ‘Doc’ Cook from Maryville, Missouri, reported concession sales at his drive-in theatre increased 25 percent overnight following the introduction of promotional trailers.<sup>853</sup>

Physical developments within the drive-in theatres’ concession stand were crucial, but so too were these trailers. With a captive audience and an expansive menu on offer, intermission trailers effectively capitalised upon movie-goers’ natural impulses. Sales were moving through the concession stand regardless, but trailers – highly visible and with a persuasive message – helped, stimulate sales further, adding an additional dimension to the outdoor exhibition model.

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<sup>851</sup> Ralph Pries, ‘Concession Merchandising’, *Theatre Catalog, 1954-55* (Philadelphia: Jay Emanuel Publications, 12<sup>th</sup> Edition), 392.

<sup>852</sup> Anon., ‘Trailers Called One of Best Sales Stimulants’, *Motion Picture Herald: Better Refreshment Merchandising*, 195:11, June 12, 1954, 8-R.

<sup>853</sup> Cook’s success with using intermission trailers was also featured as a customer testimonial on the full-page advertisements of Armour and Company (a company that produced intermission trailers), acting as evidence of the effectiveness of their products. Segrave also provides further examples of drive-in theatre operators reporting significant profit increases (typically 20 percent) following the introduction of intermission trailers. Walter Brooks, ‘The Small Town Theatre Manager Has Friends’, *Motion Picture Herald*, 195:3, April 17, 1954, 33; Armour and Company, ‘Intermission Advertisement’, *Motion Picture Herald: Better Refreshment Merchandising*, 194:10, March 6, 1954, 13-R; Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters*, 93.

The final section of this chapter discusses the concession stand within the indoor movie-theatre during this period. While significant changes occurred within the indoor movie houses during the early 1950s, it retained many qualities of the traditional concession stand model. Inherently a unique exhibition model, the drive-in theatre in contrast was open to outside influence, which accounts for why its concession stand dominated in the way that it did.

### **Part III: Lasting Influence and Legacy**

#### **‘A Concession Stand with a Motion Picture Built Around It’: The Indoor Movie-theatre, 1949-1955<sup>854</sup>**

According to *The Modern Theatre*, the immediate post-war years marked the ‘adolescence of [the] refreshment service in the motion picture theatre’.<sup>855</sup> The concession stand, as has been discussed in previous chapters, was well-established within indoor movie-theatres by 1949. Vending machines and candy counters had become firmly entrenched fixtures of virtually all American movie-theatres by this point, and were acknowledged as an important, and often much-needed, source of additional income. This was particularly true of the nation’s smaller exhibition chains and independents. For one movie-theatre in Omaha, Nebraska, for example, by 1950, it was the profits from popcorn and candy that paid the monthly film rental of \$1,500.<sup>856</sup> By the following year, the concession stand accounted for 22 percent of indoor movie-theatres’ gross revenue, and on average 63 percent of movie-goers were making purchases – a notable increase on earlier years.<sup>857</sup> The existing indoor concession model was

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<sup>854</sup> Anon., ‘Concession Promotions That Have Paid Off’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 63:19, September 5, 1953, 8.

<sup>855</sup> Kenneth Hudnall, ‘Editor’s Letter’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 58:5, December 2, 1950, 7.

<sup>856</sup> Anon., ‘Candy and Popcorn Pay the Rent’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 56:18, March 4, 1950, 40.

<sup>857</sup> Anon., ‘Sees Effort Putting Snack Sales Over 22%’, *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 185:6, November 10, 1951, 38.

thriving, finally set to reach its maturity. It would, however, quickly be eclipsed by the drive-in theatre's refreshment model. The final section of this chapter focuses on developments which occurred within the indoor movie-theatre between 1949 and 1955, many of them introduced after their profit-making value had been demonstrated at drive-in theatres.

As has already been discussed, the drive-in theatre transformed practically every aspect of the movie-theatre concession stand. Streamlining and increasing its efficiency, it boosted its ability to turn a profit to even greater heights. Its unique exhibition model allowed greater experiment, enabling it to trial and offer much greater refreshment selection and exotic offerings. While the conventional indoor movie-theatre would not replicate the same levels of success, it was not immune to the drive-in theatres' influence.

As in previous decades, renovation and modernisation was a key component of the indoor movie-theatre development during this period. In 1952, *The Modern Theatre* advised: 'The modern trend to simplicity, with beauty expressed in purity of line and restrained decor should be reflected in theatres if they are to be found wholly pleasing.'<sup>858</sup> Unlike in the years immediately following the Great Depression or World War II, however, these alterations were not the product of cosmetic neglect or outdatedness. Instead, renovation was driven by exhibitors trying to perfect the movie-going experience that they offered. This was increasingly important as attendance at indoor movie-theatres steadily declined. According to Valentine: 'Between 1947 and 1957, weekly movie theatre attendance fell by one-half'.<sup>859</sup> The film industry attributed this decline to the rising popularity of television with the American public.<sup>860</sup> The extent to which television was, in reality, a real threat to movie-theatre attendance in the early 1950s is questionable. As discussed earlier in this chapter, attendance had been in decline since 1946, several years before television sets became a

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<sup>858</sup> I. L. Thatcher, 'Editor's Letter', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 61:6, June 7, 1952, 7.

<sup>859</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 163.

<sup>860</sup> *Ibid.*

common feature of American homes.<sup>861</sup> Nonetheless, many exhibitors were driven to renovate their movie-theatres in the early 1950s, in an attempt better to compete.

With television sets slowly entering American homes, indoor exhibitors were keen to create a new movie-going experience – one less solely reliant on the films on screen but, instead, focused on creating an experience that people could not achieve within their own home. The following comment from *The Modern Theatre* supported this new exhibition philosophy: ‘The stimulation of a satisfying motion-picture, enjoyed in surroundings such as the Beekman offers, cannot be duplicated from the domestic easy chair.’<sup>862</sup> One way that this was achieved was through the introduction of novel screen technologies. It was in the early 1950s, for instance, that 3-D and Cinerama both became popular.<sup>863</sup> These technologies offered movie-goers a novel viewing experience, one that was at that point impossible to replicate within the home.<sup>864</sup> The other way lay in elevating the overall movie-going experience, specifically its levels of comfort.

For much of cinema’s history, as discussed throughout this thesis, non-filmic exhibition practices had become just as integral to the movie-going experience as the films on show. This was particularly true of the early 1950s. The changes made to indoor movie-theatres at this time were all geared towards enhancing comfort and luxury on an economy budget.<sup>865</sup> Exhibitors at all levels took steps to modernise their movie-theatres, investing in new carpets, seating, and draperies.<sup>866</sup> In regards to seating, specifically, *The Modern Theatre* commented:

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<sup>861</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 84.

<sup>862</sup> Anon., ‘Ready for that TV Competition’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 61:6, June 7, 1952, 8.

<sup>863</sup> Bohn and Stromgren, *Light and Shadows*, 242-243.

<sup>864</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 168.

<sup>865</sup> Hanns R. Teichert, ‘Elegance with Economy’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 56:10, January 7, 1950, 8-10, 36.

<sup>866</sup> Anon., ‘New Face for the Fox’, *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 59:5, June 2, 1951, 27.

Living room comfort in the theatre auditorium is an undeniable requirement if patrons are to be attracted to the house in preference to lounging at home before the television set. Such comfort is offered in the luxurious chairs which have been developed by the theatre seating industry ... The indications are that 1954 will see many, many more theatres installing new chairs.<sup>867</sup>

Boosting comfort and luxury were critical for indoor exhibitors, as they were all elements which helped to distinguish the movie-theatre from the home viewing experience. More than ever before, however, the concession stand became a crucial component. It now became the focus of the remodelling process.

Having established itself as a stable and much-needed source of revenue, the concession stand had secured a much larger presence within the indoor movie-theatre by the early 1950s. This was not only in regard to the ever-increasing importance placed on it by trade press magazines and exhibitors, but also the nature of the physical space it occupied. Already occupying a prime position within the lobby of most cinemas, many exhibitors were making significant changes to the movie-theatre layout in order to create even greater space. One way that they achieved this was by removing rows of seats from the back of the auditorium.<sup>868</sup> Dickinson Theatres, a small exhibition chain based in Missouri, Kansas, but with holdings throughout the Southern states, made the concession stand the central component of its extensive modernisation programme in 1951. In order to facilitate the changes that they wanted to undertake, management sacrificed two rows of seats.<sup>869</sup> This was a significant decision because, as *The Modern Theatre* commented, it showed 'some idea of the importance of this companion operation [referring to the concession stand] in the

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<sup>867</sup> I. L. Thatcher, 'Editor's Letter', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 64:23, April 3, 1954, 7.

<sup>868</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 171.

<sup>869</sup> Anon., 'Remodelling, Your Doorway to New Profits', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 59:5, June 2, 1951, 21-22.

Dickinson chain.<sup>870</sup> RKO, a much larger exhibition chain, also forfeited seats to accommodate larger concession stands during a renovation programme undertaken in 1950.<sup>871</sup> It was a decision that paid off. The RKO Keith's Theatre in Syracuse, New York, for example, saw refreshment profits double simply by making more space for the concession stand and relocating it from the left to the right-hand side of the lobby.<sup>872</sup> This action, of removing auditorium seats, was in some ways a symbolic statement about the economics of the film exhibition industry by the 1950s: dominating greater space and producing stable returns, the concession stand was to some extent being prioritised over film. As the manager in one Philadelphia movie-theatre joked in September 1953, many movie-theatres were becoming 'a concession stand with a motion picture built around it.'<sup>873</sup>

During the immediate post-war years, exhibitors and the trade press had become more aware of the importance of proper planning when it came to the concession stand. It was no longer an ad hoc side line, but instead a meticulously-organised operation. The emphasis placed on proper analysis and planning continued into the early 1950s. This is demonstrated by *The Modern Theatre*, which regularly discussed the importance of factors such as location, size, and efficient layout when it came to managing a successful concession stand.<sup>874</sup> After several decades, exhibitors finally understood the fundamentals and it was paying off.

Refreshment sales at the nation's indoor movie-theatres in 1951 amounted to

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<sup>870</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>871</sup> While this article from *The Modern Theatre* focused on the extensive modernisation projects occurring within seven of RKO's premiere holdings in the New York metropolitan area, it does also say that the exhibition chain had recently overhauled the concession stands at all of its 103 movie-theatres. Nevin I. Gage, 'Big Circuit Operation Typified In RKO Concession Department', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 57:18, September 2, 1950, 41-42.

<sup>872</sup> Anon., 'Concession Promotions That Have Paid Off', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 63:19, September 5, 1953, 8.

<sup>873</sup> Ibid.

<sup>874</sup> Fred C. Leavens, 'How to Get 12c Per Patron from Concession', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 64:19, March 6, 1954, 26; Philip L. Lowe, '20 Rules for Concessions Design', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 66:23, April 2, 1955, 19.

\$402,700,000.<sup>875</sup> This was a vast improvement on previous years but still paled in comparison to the drive-in theatres developing model. In 1951, for each customer an indoor exhibitor made 9 cents at the concession stand, in contrast to 16 cents at the drive-in theatre.<sup>876</sup> Indoors in their current form could simply not compete, so many of the developments that occurred within the indoor concession stand post-1949 very clearly borrowed from their outdoor counterpart.

The clearest example of this was in the motivating factors that lay behind the remodelling of many indoor concession stands at this time. There was an increasing emphasis placed on maximising efficiency and convenience. Having extensively analysed refreshment sales and layout, the drive-in theatre, as discussed earlier, streamlined all aspects of the concession stand. Determining the serving layout, every element was geared towards efficiency. Indoor movie-theatres quickly followed this lead. While the refreshment operations within indoor movie-theatres were much smaller than those at the drive-in theatre, they borrowed elements of the outdoor operation. *The Modern Theatre*'s discussion of the newly reconfigured concession stand within the Panorama Theatre in Van Nuys, California, demonstrated some of these changes:

Merchandise is attractively displayed and speedy service is the keynote of the well-planned concessions counter in the lobby ... All merchandise is within fingertip reach of the attendant ... It is also arranged compactly enough so that two attendants can handle the entire set up at peak business.<sup>877</sup>

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<sup>875</sup> Anon., 'Sees Effort Putting Snack Sales Over 22%', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 185:6, November 10, 1951, 38; A. N. Steele, 'Rising Income and Population Growth Augur Prosperity for Concessions', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 60:23, April 5, 1952, 37.

<sup>876</sup> Nevin I. Gage, 'Theatre Candy Survey, Part II', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 58:14, February 3, 1951, 30.

<sup>877</sup> Anon., 'Planning Concessions for Convenience Builds Sales', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 59:10, July 7, 1951, 37.

Reconfiguring counter space more effectively and ensuring that equipment, like the popcorn machine, were easily accessible were all simple but necessary changes. While not radical developments by any means, indoor exhibitors were now putting greater consideration into the layout of their stands in a way that they had not done earlier, making better use of the available space.

Boosting efficiency was arguably the most significant effect that the drive-in had on the indoor refreshment model, but other elements of its particular approach to the concession stand also began to migrate indoors. This is demonstrated, for example, in the wave of new concession machines and equipment entering the indoor movie-theatre at this time, the most obvious example being the popcorn warmer. This, as previously discussed, initially met with resistance from many exhibitors. Favoured at the drive-in theatre due to its ability to cater to higher volume of sales effectively, it also gradually made inroads into the conventional indoor movie-theatre too. By September 1950, for example, as part of its concession stand overhaul, RKO had installed popcorn warmers throughout its 103 holdings.<sup>878</sup> Easily incorporated into any concession operation, popcorn warmers were particularly attractive to movie-theatres of a larger size, simply because of their ability to cater to a large volume of sales effectively. RKO, which had many large-size movie-theatres, adapted to this change very early, but by the late 1950s the popcorn warmer was becoming mainstream.

Soda and ice-cream had both tentatively entered the movie-theatre in the 1940s and, by 1952, the former had established itself as a concession stand staple, accounting for 11 percent of indoor concession sales, which equated to profits of \$44,302,000.<sup>879</sup> The growing popularity of these items at the drive-in theatre led to a renewed effort by indoor exhibitors to

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<sup>878</sup> Nevin I. Gage, 'Big Circuit Operation Typified In RKO Concession Department', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 57:18, September 2, 1950, 42.

<sup>879</sup> A. N. Steele, 'Rising Income and Population Growth Augur Prosperity for Concessions', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 60:23, April 5, 1952, 37.

sell these items, a process that was aided by the availability of more sophisticated equipment. While there was a variety of soda dispensers available in the immediate post-war years, many required an attendant to operate them. Just as with the popcorn warmer, this was slowly changing during the early 1950s. The drive-in theatre demonstrated how easily self-service machines could be integrated within the existing concession operation. Subsequently, new machines of this type entered the market, the Pic-a-Bar being one example. A 'self-contained refrigerated cabinet' with an open display, it used merchandising to target the impulse nature of refreshment purchases.<sup>880</sup> The look of the unit (it was designed to look like an igloo) was important, but so too was its self-service element: 'It was not enough that the ice cream be just seen and kept cool. Self-service constituted a big point – how to arrange a way for the buyer to be able to reach in and take what he wanted, yet always find it cold and compact.'<sup>881</sup> In a trial of the Pic-a-Bar in late 1950, Fox West Coast found that ice-cream sales in its movie-theatres 'tripled in most cases and in some quadrupled'.<sup>882</sup> The exhibition chain attributed this to movie-goers' new found ability to access the ice-creams themselves, which gave them greater autonomy in choosing which ice-cream they wanted.<sup>883</sup> Witnessing the success being had at the nation's drive-ins gave exhibitors of indoor movie-theatres the confidence to step out of their own earlier comfort zones.

The installation of more efficient machines and equipment for the established concession stand staples was a simple yet effective change for exhibitors to take. The drive-in theatres' influence did not stop there, however. As has been previously discussed, hot dogs and ice cream became mainstream at indoor movie-theatres during this period. The snow cone was another drive-in item that successfully transitioned indoors. Cheap to produce (all

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<sup>880</sup> Anon., 'Ice Cream Dispenser Features Visibility and Self-Service', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 57:18, September 2, 1950, 44.

<sup>881</sup> Ibid.

<sup>882</sup> Ibid.

<sup>883</sup> Anon., 'Self-Service Increases Sales', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 65:10, July 3, 1954, 35.

that was needed was shaved ice, syrup, and Dixie cups) and creating limited mess, they were well-suited to the indoor movie-theatre. Sold for 10 cents each, the Gay Theatre in Knoxville, Tennessee, found snow cones to be popular year-round.<sup>884</sup> While the indoor menu would not become as adventurous as its outdoor counterparts, by the mid-1950s it had expanded from the traditional mainstays of popcorn, candy, and soda.

Following its outdoor counterparts' success with intermission trailers, many indoor movie-theatres also took better steps actively to promote their concession stands. While intermissions were commonplace at indoor cinemas from the 1940s, indoor exhibitors were not as forward in promoting their use for sales. This failure was reflected in their respective profits – as noted on p. 286, drive-ins in 1951 made almost double the income from refreshment sales for each ticket sold as indoor houses.<sup>885</sup> By 1952, several movie-theatres in Minneapolis, Minnesota, including downtown holdings of RKO, turned to intermission trailers to 'bolster declining revenues.'<sup>886</sup> After promoting their concession stands with a series of colourful cartoons, refreshment sales at these movie-theatres were seen to increase.<sup>887</sup> While some exhibitors were reluctant to rely too heavily on this type of merchandising, concerned that it was too aggressive and could have a negative impact on sales, many began to embrace it. In a reversion to the pattern of earlier decades, it was the major exhibition chains, the likes of RKO and Fox West Coast, rather than independents that utilised intermission trailers most heavily.<sup>888</sup>

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<sup>884</sup> Anon., "'Snow Balls" Catch On At Indoor Theatre', *Motion Picture Herald: Better Theatres*, 191:2, April 11, 1953, 31.

<sup>885</sup> Nevin I. Gage, 'Theatre Candy Survey, Part II', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 58:14, February 3, 1951, 30.

<sup>886</sup> Anon., 'Indoor Houses Now Feature Intermissions to Bolster Concession Revenues', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 60:14, February 2, 1952, 44.

<sup>887</sup> Ibid.

<sup>888</sup> Nevin I. Gage, 'Added Profits from Chewing Gum Sales Outweigh Cleaning Problems Incurred', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 60:10, January 5, 1952, 36.

In a reversal of developments in the 1910s and for most of the 1920s, however, it was the major exhibition chains that were leading concession stand developments within indoor movie-theatres by the 1950s. This shift is symptomatic of the wider film exhibition industry's awareness of the importance of the concession stand as a source of profit by this period – a process which had begun during the war years. By the early 1950s, it had become an important component of the exhibition model, and an area that the majors – now of diminishing importance post-*Paramount* – were keen to cultivate and fully capitalise upon. This helps to explain why indoor exhibitors were so open to learning from the drive-in theatre operation. By 1955, indoor movie-theatres were reportedly taking 26 cents per patron at the concession stand.<sup>889</sup> While this was significantly less than the drive-in theatre, which took on average 45 cents, it was a notable increase from 1954 when indoor cinemas made between 18 to 21 cents per patron in refreshment sales.<sup>890</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Having rewritten the rule book on concession stand operation, the drive-in theatre showed the positive benefits of updating the movie-theatre refreshment operation. Close analysis of concession stand sales enabled outdoor exhibitors to make changes to their refreshment operation that yielded significant results. Importantly, their success also demonstrated that these were changes that the American movie-going public wanted. There was an appetite for things other than popcorn and, by catering to this, exhibitors could reap the benefits. While many of the new food items introduced by the mid-1950s proved too exotic to ever transition on a widespread scale into conventional indoor movie-theatres, the successful integration of

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<sup>889</sup> Anon., 'Liquid Assets', *Theatre Catalog, 1954-55* (Philadelphia: Jay Emanuel Publications, 12<sup>th</sup> Edition), 385.

<sup>890</sup> I. L. Thatcher, 'Editor's Letter', *Boxoffice: The Modern Theatre*, 65:2, May 8, 1954, 7.

hot dogs, snow cones, and the popcorn warmer demonstrate the drive-in theatre's influence on the indoors concession stand. As Valentine has described it: 'By 1956 attendance was half of what it had been in 1948, but concession sales [for both drive-in theatres and indoor theatres] had increased more than forty times'.<sup>891</sup> By the mid-1950s, the concession stand had established a greater presence within the indoor movie-theatre than ever before. For this, it owed a debt of gratitude to the drive-in theatre, a form of exhibition long looked down upon by the traditional film industry.

The period discussed in this chapter was the drive-in theatres' golden age, a heyday that was short-lived. The popularity of this unique exhibition model had begun to wane by the 1960s, heralding a period of rapid stagnation and decline in subsequent decades. By the 1980s, Segrave suggests that the drive-in theatre had followed 'the path of the dinosaur'.<sup>892</sup> Despite the rapid decline in the drive-in theatres' popularity, it cast a long shadow over the American movie-theatre concession stand. Developments first originating at the nation's outdoor movie-theatres had begun to make slow inroads into their indoor counterparts during the 1950s, a process that continued to gain momentum in the subsequent decades. While the drive-in theatre faded from use, its concession stand model had a significant and lasting impact on the exhibition model that superseded it from the 1980s, namely the modern multiplex.

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<sup>891</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts*, 171; Anon., 'Theatre Receipts Down 17% From '48; Concessions Up', *Motion Picture Daily*, 76:14, July 21, 1954, 1.

<sup>892</sup> Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters*, 198.

## **Conclusion: ‘The Second Box Office’**

‘Today, that stepchild of the theatre industry is a booming, bustling business that turned a half-billion dollar gross profit in 1952.’<sup>893</sup>

As referenced in the introduction, this comment made by *Theatre Catalog* illustrates the argument that lies at the heart of this thesis. By the mid-1950s, the point at which this research project ends, the movie-theatre concession stand had thoroughly cemented its position as an integral and vital component of the American film exhibition model. Whether relating to indoor movie-theatres, or drive-in theatres, the sale of refreshments was no longer an inconsequential side-line, but a successful business in its own right. It provided a necessary source of income that, for many exhibitors, was equally as important as box-office profits. Focusing on the years 1914 to 1955, this thesis has traced the key developments which led to the concession stand’s dramatic change in status in such a relatively short period of time, the space of just a few decades.

The starting-point of this thesis was the dearth in film scholarship concerning the concession stand. Given its increasingly important position within the present film exhibition model, it is surprising that so little has been written about its history. Douglas Gomery, who has provided the only comprehensive account of American film exhibition so far, summarised the entire history of the concession stand in just four pages.<sup>894</sup> While the concession stand’s inclusion in his book was a step forward, such coverage is far from being sufficiently adequate to explain these complex developments that transformed exhibition practices. Based on extensive archival research, this thesis has built upon Gomery’s interpretation of the concession stand, pointing out several of the flaws within his narrative. This is most clearly seen in chapters one and two, which work together to deconstruct the

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<sup>893</sup> Anon., ‘The Second Box Office’, 342.

<sup>894</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 79-82.

dominant narrative, originating with Gomery's book, that food was strictly prohibited within American movie-theatres throughout the 1920s. In the standard narrative, it is argued that this decision was only reversed out of sheer economic desperation during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Archival research suggests that this was simply not the case. The immense diversity within American film exhibition, especially during its earlier years, meant that there could in any case never be one universal history of the concession stand. It is instead a history that is complex, and full of nuance and variety.

This thesis challenges existing approaches to the concession stand by engaging in the analysis of movie industry sources and archival materials. Publications such as *Variety*, *The Film Daily*, and *Boxoffice* are commonly featured in the footnotes and bibliographies of scholarly literature on cinema history, and have been used throughout this thesis. The insight they offer is invaluable, offering a window through which scholars can view many aspects of the American film industry – be that box-office statistics, new technology, or the star system. Their inclusion within this thesis is not in itself innovative, but the way that they have been used is. Film trade press magazines have been analysed to gather and trace information relating to matters such as attendance rates, regional exhibition conditions at certain periods of time, and important developments occurring within the movie-theatres and the wider film industry. *Variety*'s discussion of trade union activity in the late 1930s, for example, proved invaluable to help build a picture of what was then occurring within movie-theatres, and how it impacted the candy counter, the dominant refreshment model at that time. These and other publications have been searched for any grain of information that they can reveal, often unintentionally, about the concession stand. This might be, for example, a movie-theatre falling victim to crime or accounts of audience behaviours. Seemingly unrelated, such sources have all revealed valuable insights, enabling the building of a more accurate picture of the concession stand and how it functioned.

Extensive analysis of film trade press magazines as well as other archival materials created a dramatically different image of the movie-theatre concession stand during cinema's early history. Undermining the traditional narrative within scholarship about American cinema in the 1920s, it demonstrated that there was no universal prohibition of refreshments within American movie-theatres at this time. As chapter one points out, independent exhibitors across the country were selling candy and chewing gum via vending machines throughout the decade. Creators popcorn machine catalogues and the testimonials that they contain also demonstrate how some exhibitors in the Midwest were finding popcorn to be a profitable side-line. Presenting a drastically different narrative of the concession stand during the 1920s, chapter one in many ways belongs to the wider revisionist movement within film exhibition studies, promoted by scholars such as Robert C. Allen and Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley, that suggests that American film exhibition did not comply with one neat universal model, but instead was characterised by significant diversity. The studio-owned picture palaces of New York City and Chicago were cultivating one type of movie-going experience, influenced by wider attitudes towards class and respectability that permeated metropolitan areas, but exhibitors in small towns and more rural areas were guided by different motivations and strategies. Lacking the financial support of the Hollywood studios and at the end of the queue in regard to film distribution, independents in small towns and rural areas needed to make a profit however they could, and refreshments proved over time a reliable way of doing this.

Chapter two questioned further the dominant narrative of the concession stand presented in film scholarship. Again making use of film trade press magazines but also, crucially, *Publix Opinion*, it challenged the assertion that it was only as a result of the onset of the Great Depression that American exhibitors accepted the idea of the concession stand. Archival materials demonstrate that this was not at all the case, as proven by the analysis of

exhibition chains Publix and Fox. As documented extensively in movie industry sources, both these chains committed to the utilisation of candy vending machines in the months preceding the October 1929 Wall Street Crash. This is highly significant, not only for challenging notions of the origins of the concession stand but also for calling into question the assumption by Gomery and others that the picture palaces in metropolitan centres opposed the idea of refreshments in their movie-theatres. Crucially, *Publix Opinion* provided invaluable and previously unexplored access to the voices of those making these decisions. Max Schosberg, Head of Publix's Candy Department, attributed the exhibition chain's interest in this non-filmic exhibition practice to the proven profitability of candy vending machines as demonstrated by independent exhibitors throughout the decade. Involved in the decision-making process, his explanation for the motivations behind this development – that it made good business sense – appear somewhat more reliable than the conjecture of later scholars.

A severe scarcity of sugar in the early 1940s, as a consequence of the United States' involvement in World War II, forced a new development within the movie-theatre concession stand. The focus of chapter three, popcorn's widescale introduction and rapid rise to a dominant position on the concession stand, is a critical moment in the history of refreshments in cinema. Crop reports from the U.S. Department of Agriculture testified to the dramatic increase in popcorn cultivation over the course of the war, a product of the crop being deemed essential to the war effort. Film trade press magazines were used to piece together developments occurring within the movie-theatre during the 1940s. In reaction to the concession stand's growing importance to the film exhibition industry, a rapidly-growing concession-related industry began to emerge at this time. The history of this was constructed on the basis of articles and case studies in *The Modern Theatre* and also close analysis of the advertisements published more widely in *Boxoffice* between the years 1937 and 1955.

*Boxoffice*, which contained the highest concentration of these advertisements, was a cinema trade publication targeted largely at exhibitors and movie-theatre managers. As noted throughout this thesis, the publication's interest in the concession stand only grew as the period progressed, a process that can be traced through its advertisements. Analysis of these advertisements has, for example, made it possible to reconstruct what concession-related products and equipment was available on the market, enabling the identification of the different manufacturers and wholesalers operating across the period and their respective product lines, as well as general trends and changes over time. The results of this analysis are discussed in both chapter three and chapter four. These advertisements also provide an additional layer of understanding of the sales spiel being used to market the concession stand to exhibitors. Extensive discussion in chapter three of the popcorn machine manufacturer Manley's advertising campaign in the years before and immediately after World War II demonstrates the value of analysing advertisements in this way. A hidden goldmine of information, *Boxoffice*'s advertisements have the potential to shed light on other important aspects of film exhibition, not just the concession stand. These include non-filmic exhibition practices such as air-conditioning and seating, for example, as well as developments relating to projection and sound technologies.

Unlike previous chapters that analyse conventional indoor exhibition models, chapter four focuses on the concession stand within the context of the drive-in theatre. Watching a film from the comfort of one's vehicle drastically affected the movie-going experience, but also resulted in a significant expansion in concession stand refreshments. At a time when the American film industry had come to see the concession stand as a necessary source of additional income for many exhibitors, analysis of various film trade press magazines demonstrated how the drive-in theatre encouraged its indoor counterpart to experiment and be bold in regard to refreshments. Although the drive-in was relatively short-lived as an

exhibition model, the key developments discussed and analysed in chapter four provide evidence of its lasting and long-overlooked impact on the indoor refreshment operation in subsequent decades.

In many ways this thesis is a history of popcorn, candy, and soda, but it also offers more. Analysing the concession stand's history and evolution at length, it has explained the significance of each development to the economic film exhibition model. It is important here to recognise that the concession stand and movie-theatre have a truly symbiotic relationship: it is difficult to discuss one without also talking about the other. Several exhibition models appeared, and subsequently declined, during the period under investigation, often having different attitudes and approaches towards the concession stand. This thesis has traced the evolution of the American movie-theatre across the first half of the twentieth century, in order to understand the wider context in which the concession stand was located, and how the conditions facing these exhibition spaces impacted its development. The picture palace, neighbourhood movie-theatre, and drive-in theatre have all been discussed at length.

The thesis has also addressed the importance of non-filmic exhibition practices and how they impacted the movie-going experience. "House appeal", the term introduced by *The Modern Theatre* in the late 1930s, is apt as a quick summary of this important but often overlooked aspect of film exhibition. Throughout cinema's history, it is these added extras which have been turned to when the box office itself has seemed under threat. More than this, the centrality of the movie-theatre within the local community during the first half of the twentieth century has been a major discussion point here.

Just as film exhibition was under threat in earlier periods from various factors, for example, the rise of television during the 1950s, cinema is in a fairly precarious situation presently. The rise of online streaming services in recent years had already led some exhibitors to develop the non-filmic aspects of their operations. The introduction of deluxe

seating and fine dining by some exhibition chains, for instance, provides a clear example of exhibitors attempting to craft a unique movie-going experience not available within the home. In the wake of Covid-19, it is safe to assume that non-filmic exhibition practices, specifically the concession stand, are only going to become more important to the continued survival of exhibition in cinema spaces.

This is already demonstrated by the actions of some independent exhibitors who are thinking about how they can continue to operate in some capacity despite the restrictions they are facing. Several independent movie-theatres in Chicago, for example, when, forced to close due to the Covid-19 outbreak, continued to sell popcorn (priced at \$5 a box) for movie-goers to enjoy at home.<sup>895</sup> Since the 1970s, with the advent of microwaveable popcorn, people have been able to make popcorn at home but these Chicago exhibitors found their popcorn takeaway service was incredibly popular because people wanted “authentic” movie-theatre popcorn. A simple service, one that brought in a small income for these movie-theatres, the takeaway popcorn service harks back to the short-term survival mentality of exhibitors during the Great Depression. In many ways it is also a service to lift community spirits, something that enables people to bring a small taste of the movie-theatre to their at-home movie experience.

In the same vein, drive-in theatres have seen a resurgence during the pandemic – a situation not unique to the United States, but witnessed in numerous places across the globe.<sup>896</sup> The unique experience of viewing a film from within the comfort of a vehicle is perfectly suited to the current social distancing measures. As a result, the drive-in theatre

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<sup>895</sup> Michael Phillips, ‘Chicago’s movie theaters: federal aid for some, others tough it out. Meantime there’s popcorn at the Pickwick’, *Chicago Tribune*, April 26, 2020. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/movies/michael-phillips/ct-mov-chicago-movie-theaters-aid-0424-20200426-gv43dpcvtze5dira5ujdmwpnae-story.html> [accessed on March 13, 2021].

<sup>896</sup> Alex Scimecca and Radhika Marya, ‘Photo essay: The drive-in sees a resurgence throughout the world’, *Fortune*, August 1, 2020. <https://fortune.com/2020/08/01/photos-drive-in-theaters-coronavirus-pandemic/> [accessed on March 13, 2021].

model is being adapted not only to show films but, in many areas, also being used for a myriad of other events, including concerts, comedy shows, and church services. Many audiences used to the multiplex movie-going experience are now being introduced to a new way of watching films. In an increasingly digital age where many films, even the newest releases, can be watched from the comfort of one's home, non-filmic exhibition practices and the wider movie-going experience are only going to grow in importance.

This thesis, it is hoped, will be a first step in redressing the lack of scholarship on the movie-theatre concession stand. It deals much more comprehensively with the subject than Gomery and other previous scholarly accounts yet, even so, it could be further developed. One important dimension here would be the discussion of race in relation to the concession stand and the American movie-going experience. Since it is focused on the economic and technological development of the movie-theatre concession stand, discussion of race is largely absent from this thesis. This is because, despite increasingly scholarly interest, the experience of African Americans remains very under-represented in the historical archive. Information about the concession stand is difficult enough to trace in film trade press publications but the recorded experience of African Americans in relation to it so far seems at the moment to be lacking. This is one subject area that needs further research.

The period of time covered by this thesis was a turbulent one. During the first half of the twentieth century, American society was undergoing a dramatic transformation. One thing that did not change, however, was that America remained a racially segregated country. The Jim Crow laws impacted all aspects of daily life for a large portion of the American populace, including their cinema-going experience. As Andrea Kelley has commented:

The rise in theatrical moviegoing in the US roughly corresponds to and frequently was informed by segregationist social practices in the South and beyond ... With separate entrances, ticket booths, balconies, and stairwells,

and even separate theaters, the spaces and architecture of movie exhibition during Jim Crow highlight how the arrangement of the screening site and the material conditions of exhibition shape the experiences of film viewing as much as the films themselves.<sup>897</sup>

Traditionally, scholars have focused on presenting the movie-going experience within the studio-owned exhibition chains, an experience that was largely enjoyed by white middle-class Americans. The movie-going experience of African Americans has, as a result, long been neglected. Kelley is one scholar seeking to revise this, along with others such as Thomas Doherty and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, whose work seeks to remove the racial bias.<sup>898</sup> With more time and further archival research, there is perhaps potential to bring in discussion of race in relation to the concession stand and the wider movie-going experience. Oral-history interviews, for example, in conjunction with analysis of local newspapers and film trade press magazines could be used to research and write a localised case study focused on the film exhibition conditions in a specific neighbourhood, town or region.

Building upon this, there is also scope to expand the project underpinning this thesis to promote a much broader discussion of the concession stand in relation to movie audiences. The thesis itself has focused on the concession stand as a component of the film exhibition model, viewing the movie-theatre as a business. It has also focused principally on understanding the concession stand from the exhibitors' perspective: analysing the information and advice that was available to them and the choices that they made about their refreshment operation. The audience and their reaction to the concession stand is frequently glimpsed, in short comments from film trade press publications or profit reports, but their

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<sup>897</sup> Kelley, 'Bedsheet Cinema', 3-4.

<sup>898</sup> Thomas Doherty, 'Race Houses, Jim Crow Roosts, and Lily White Palaces: Desegregating the Motion Picture Theater', in Maltby et al., ed., *Going to the Movies*, 196-214; Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

voice is largely absent. There is scope, therefore, to do a more focused study of how American audiences reacted and related to the concession stand, using archival materials also incorporating more of a more ethnographical approach, like Lyons' study that made use of oral history, to capture people's actual experiences of movie-going.<sup>899</sup> This would be difficult for the earlier periods given the distance in time from the present, but a study of this type about the drive-in theatre would be feasible. It would also add to the small literature currently focused on the drive-in theatre. The current scholarship for this unique exhibition model is comprehensive and detailed but, aside from general histories by Kerry Segrave and Don and Susan Sanders respectively, dedicated literature is sparse.<sup>900</sup> Given its resurgence in popularity with the general public, the drive-in theatre might be one area of film exhibition worthy of further research and analysis. A focused case study would be a good addition to the existing literature on the subject.

Another area of further research potentially arising from the research done for this thesis relates to how the movie-theatre could be used as a window through which to view the changing role of women within American society during the twentieth century. As discussed in various parts of the thesis, film trade press magazines often alluded to who was working at the concession stand and, since the introduction of candy counters in the early 1930s, this was typically young women. This did not change drastically over the period principally covered by this thesis, between the 1930s and 1950s, and it was typically women who worked at and often managed the refreshment business within a movie-theatre. What did change, however, was women's position more generally within movie-theatres throughout the period.

During the 1930s, discussion of trade union action, for example, makes it clear that while women manned the candy counter and acted as usherettes, they were not in positions of

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<sup>899</sup> Lyons, 'What about the Popcorn?'

<sup>900</sup> Segrave, *Drive-in Theaters*; Sanders and Sanders, *The American Drive-In Movie Theater*.

power. As with many other industries and job sectors, this changed during World War II. After the USA went to war in December 1941, thousands of men enlisted to serve their country – meaning that, on the home front, there were gaps to be filled in the labour market. Within American movie-theatres, what is significant is not just that women took on extra roles, for example as ushers and ticket attendants, it was that they now had access to the more highly-skilled positions.

Reports in *Variety* refer to female managers making significant updates and changes to their movie-theatres and women being trained to be projectionists – a role that was not typically available to them in previous years. It was not that women were simply filling the labour gap; it seems that they were using this shortage to leverage better, more skilled jobs. *Variety* reported in 1942 how one exhibitor in Detroit, Michigan, in a desperate attempt to stop his female staff leaving his employment to train as secretaries, promised better wages, skills training, and managerial duties.<sup>901</sup> Unlike other industries, women retained this power in the post-war years – something evidenced by numerous movie-theatre case studies published in *The Modern Theatre* in the post-1946 years that attest to cases in which the exhibitor or movie-theatre manager was female. Many drive-in theatres were also run by women. The changing role of women in society at this time, largely a consequence of World War II, is not a new area of study: much has been written about it more generally. Yet a project focusing on this development within the movie-theatre specifically, would add a new angle to this existing literature on women at work. It would also be helpful to Film Studies, as not much has been written about those who worked at American movie-theatres.

The concession stand took many forms over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, from back-of-seat vending machines in 1914 through manned candy counters in 1932, popcorn machines in the 1940s and full-fledged refreshment bars at drive-in

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<sup>901</sup> Anon., 'Idzal's System', *Variety*, 146:10, May 13, 1942, 12.

theatres by the mid-1950s that were in many ways more akin to a modern fast-food restaurant. While removed in time from the multiplex model that presently dominates American film exhibition, it is only by understanding the developments and technological advances that occurred in earlier decades that the concession stand's current crucial status within the film exhibition industry can be understood. Many aspects of the modern multiplex concession stand model can be traced back to these earlier periods. The drive-in theatre in particular, for example, has had a significant and lasting-impact. Its legacy is witnessed in several aspects of the multiplex's concession stand model: the foods on offer, combo deals, and the manner in which refreshments are prepared and sold.

No longer the overlooked 'stepchild' of the American film industry, the concession stand, as it has been for most of its history, lives up to its status as the 'second box office'. Without the concession stand, many movie-theatres would simply not have survived; it is, therefore, a component of the movie-theatre which is absolutely vital to the history of cinema itself. Resituating the concession stand within the history of the American movie-theatre and film exhibition industry more widely, this thesis argues it deserves much greater attention within film exhibition scholarship. Our understanding of film exhibition, and of the economics of cinema, is greatly enhanced by resituating the concession stand within the history of the American movie theatre.

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