

# COLUMBIA'S CINEMA EVOLUTION

By Dianna Borsi O'Brien

## Venues come and go, movie magic endures

### "It was wonderful."

That's how Marian Ohman, 83, describes the days when there were a handful of "movie palaces," in downtown Columbia.

Not cinemas. Not just places to see movies. These were ornate, whimsical, exotic gems of architecture with seating for 1,000 or more, and their popularity compelled one early movie theater mogul, Marcus Loew, to declare, "We sell tickets to theaters, not movies."

These beauties — the three remaining and those that have been lost — will be celebrated in an exhibit to be unveiled next week at the Missouri Theatre Center for the Arts.

The display outlines the history of downtown theaters in Columbia and historical highlights of the vaudeville and film industry in the US. The project has been a longtime labor of love by Marge Berchek and the history committee of the Missouri Symphony Society. The society bought the theater in 1988, 60 years after it was built, and restored the structure in 2008.

The exhibit will be on display in the theater's history lounge in an alcove at the rear of the lobby area, where other artifacts from the theater's renovation are on display.

The first motion picture shown in Columbia was screened in 1897 at the Haden Opera House, which was built three years previously and was destroyed by fire in 1901.

### Haden to Hollywood

In her research, Berchek came up with a long list of theaters established in Columbia since the turn of the last century and amazing tidbits about movie-going habits.

A few examples:

- The first film shown in Columbia was at the Haden Opera House in 1897, and the first film to use a sound projector was *The Jazz Singer*, shown at the

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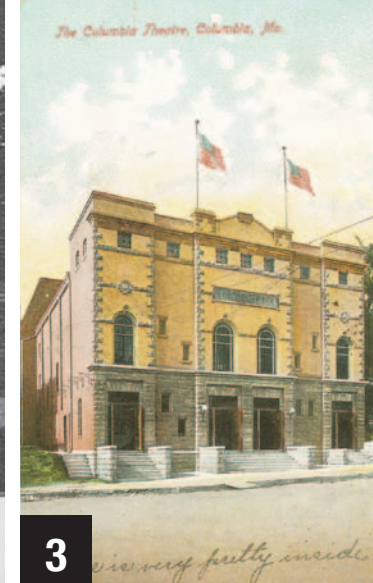


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"AIRDOM"—VAUDEVILLE THEATRE. Owned by B. E. Hatton.



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**1. Long Gone:** The M Theater operated from 1909 to 1914 at 8-10 N. Ninth St. and had 400 seats. Across the street was The Elite, which opened in 1908 a few doors from The Star. *Photo courtesy Historical Society.*

**2. The Originals:** The first motion picture shown in Columbia was screened in 1897 at the Haden Opera House, which was built three years previously and was destroyed by fire in 1901. The former manager of the opera house salvaged scenery and equipment and in 1906 opened the Airdome Theater, a canvas structure just south of Wabash Station on the northeast corner of 10th and Walnut, according to the book *Historic Downtown Columbia*. After a brief move to the 600 block of Broadway downtown in a building with a moveable steel roof, the Airdome returned to the original site in 1909, expanded and was named The Hippodrome. The structure, the city's largest theater with 1,455 seats, was destroyed by fire in 1919. *Photo courtesy Historical Society.*

**3. Columbia Theater,** with 1,100 seats, opened at 1103 E. Broadway in 1907 and was ruined by fire in 1929. The first floor remains and houses the Van Matre, Harrison and Hollis law office. Another former movie house is now occupied by Slackers. From 1907 to 1927, and again from 1935 to 1985, it operated as a movie house under various names: Bijo Dream, Broadway Odeon, Cozy and Uptown.

**4. The Varsity,** on 17 N. Ninth, was built in 1927 on the site of the razed Star theater and had 640 seats. The name was later changed to the Film Arts Theater, and the building operated as a theater until 1988. The yellow-brick structure later became The Blue Note, a concert hall that occasionally shows movies and is a venue for the True/False Film Festival. *Photos By: Todd Berchek.*

**5. Hall Theatre:** Tom C. Hall closed the Star theater, which had 640 seats, razed the building on 17 N. Ninth St. and built the Hall Theatre a block south at 102 S. Ninth St. The Hall Theatre, with 1,291 seats in 1915, was used to screen *The Jazz Singer* in 1928. Hall used a Vitaphone projector, the only sound projector in Missouri outside of St. Louis and Kansas City. The building is now occupied by Panera Bread Co. *Photos courtesy Historical Society.*

**6. The Missouri Theatre** opened in 1928 at 203 S. Ninth St. In 1953, the building was leased to Commonwealth Theatre and operated as a movie theater until 1987, when it was purchased by the Missouri Symphony Society. The structure was renovated in 2008. *Photos courtesy Historical Society.*

**7. Modern Venues: Forum and Hollywood:** The Forum was built in the 1960s and originally was a one-screen theater. In 1992, the Forum 8 behind the Forum Shopping Center was built, and Goodrich bought the business in 1998. Hollywood Theater's Stadium 14 at the eastern end of Stadium Boulevard opened in 1997 with 2,700 seats. *Photo by Jennifer Kettler.*

**8. The Arthouse: Ragtag Cinema:** The Ragtag Film Society started showing films at The Blue Note in 1997, became the Ragtag Cinema in 2000, located at the Oddfellows building, 23 N. 10th St. The nonprofit independent movie theater moved in 2008 moved to 10 Hitt St., an historic building that had been a Coke bottling plant. There is a 130-seat screening room and a lounge theater with 75 seats. *Photo by Jennifer Kettler.*



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1884-1901  
Haden Opera House. Destroyed by fire; it showed Columbia's first film in 1897.

1906  
Airdome, at 10th and Walnut, then 609-611 Broadway, then 10th across from Wabash.

1907-1927, 1935-1985-present  
Today, the location houses Slackers, but from 1907-1927, it was the Bijo Dream, Broadway Odeon, Cozy, Uptown. It was then used as retail space until 1935-1985, when it was a movie theater.

1907-1929  
Columbia Theatre. Built in 1907, the top two floors were destroyed by fire in 1929. Today, the remaining portion of the building at 1103 E. Broadway is a law office.

1909-1916  
The Star, 17 N. Ninth, 640 seats. The Varsity, which later becomes The Blue Note, is built on this lot.

1909-1914  
The M Theater, 8-10 N. Ninth St., 400 seats.

1908-1909  
The Elite, 13 N. Ninth St.

1913-1919 — The Hippodrome theater showed movies at the site of the old Airdome at 10th and Walnut. A wood-frame building with 1,455 seats, it was the city's largest theater. It burned to the ground in 1919.

1915-1973-Present  
Hall Theatre, 1,291 seats. Built in 1915 by Tom C. Hall. In 1928, *The Jazz Singer* was shown there using a Vitaphone sound projector. Now Panera Bread Co

1927-Present  
The Varsity, 17 N. Ninth St. Opened as the Varsity, it then became the Film Arts Theatre, then the Comic Book Club, now The Blue Note. Operated as a movie theater until 1988.

1928-Present  
The Missouri Theatre, 203 S. Ninth St. In 1953, leased to Commonwealth Theatre. Operated as a movie theater until 1987, then purchased by the Missouri Symphony Society and renovated in 2008.

1929  
Missouri, Hall and Varsity begin to show movies on Sundays, despite protests at Methodist Church.

1948  
17,811: the number of indoor screens, according to National Association of Theatre Owners. This is the first year for which figures are available.

1949-?  
The Columbia Broadway Drive-in Theater, at site of today's Gerbes on Broadway.

1953  
Missouri Theatre leased to Commonwealth Theatre.

1954  
The number of screens hits 14,716, a loss of more than 3,000 screens in six years, according to the National Association of Theatre Owners.

1959  
\$10.9 billion: the amount of money spent by people on going to movie theaters (in 2005 dollars), according to Bureau of Economic Analysis, US Department of Commerce.

This is the first year for which figures are available about expenditures on attending movies.

1962  
The number of indoor screens bottoms out at 9,150, down from 14,716 in 1954, according to the National Association of Theatre Owners.

1960s  
The Forum one-screen theater is built in the 1960s. In 1992, the Forum 8 at 1209 Katy Parkway is built and purchased by Goodrich in 1998.

1966-1998  
The Cinema, at 1729 W. Broadway, next to drive-in. Its 50-foot widescreen is the city's largest. It had 800 seats.

1966  
The Varsity, now The Blue Note, becomes Film Arts Theatre.

1973  
The Hall stops showing movies.

1973  
\$7.1 billion: the amount people spent going to movie theaters in 2005 dollars, according to Bureau of Economic Analysis, US Department of Commerce.