

Oak Ridge Theaters and “CYNTHIA”

(As published in The Oak Ridger’s Historically Speaking column on April 14, 2009)

Jim Comish, Director of the American Museum of Science and Energy, sent me an e-mail recently asking if I would consider talking to Bob Baker. It seems Bob had contacted Jim regarding the early history of the theaters in Oak Ridge. I agreed as I am always thankful for folks who bring stories my way.

Bob Baker soon called and left a message that he had some information about the history of the theaters in Oak Ridge. He wondered if I might be interested in doing an article for *Historically Speaking* on the subject. Of course, I knew about Bobby Copeland and his fine articles focusing on the interesting aspects of Oak Ridge’s theaters over the years from his personal experience and wondered if I could add anything of value.

However, I did agree to talk to Bob and he suggested we meet at Gene Hick’s house as Bob said Gene had some photographs and written information he had collected that might be useful. I agreed and we set a time to meet. Well, I certainly enjoyed the time we spent talking about early Oak Ridge.

Bob worked as Assistant Manager of the Grove Theater during the 1940’s and as Relief Manager for other theaters in Oak Ridge. One of the people he hired as Usher was Gene Hicks who worked at the Grove Theater beginning in September 1946.

Gene moved to the Jefferson Theater and was the manager there when it closed in 1950. He was also relief manager for the Center Theater at the time.

The information Gene and Bob shared with me included much of what Bobby Copeland had documented already, but it also included some specific information about the theaters that I had not seen before. So, I thought writing the story they suggested was worth the effort and would prove interesting to *Historically Speaking* readers.

First, let me remind you of some of the details regarding our history of theaters in Oak Ridge. There were actually six theaters in Oak Ridge and two drive-in theaters just outside the gates to Oak Ridge in the 1940’s.

The very first theater was the Center Theater, that opened on August 31, 1943, showing, *IN WHICH WE SERVE*. The Center Theater was located at Jackson Square in the building that is the Oak Ridge Playhouse today.

The Ridge Theater opened April 6, 1944, showing, *WHAT A WOMAN*, and was located near Jackson Square just down the street from where Big Ed’s Pizza is located today.

The Grove Theater opened September 28, 1944, showing, *HAIL THE CONQUERING HERO*, and was located in Grove Center where High Places Church is located today.

The Jefferson Theater opened November 2, 1944, showing, *THOUSANDS CHEER*, and was located at Jefferson Center just behind the Jefferson Drug Store. The Wayne Theater operated briefly in the building after the Jefferson closed, according to Bobby Copeland, and Bobby also indicated that the structure burned in 1980.

The Middletown Theater, likely opened in early 1944, and was the only theater in Oak Ridge with a balcony. It was the only theater that allowed “colored” people to attend provided they sit in the balcony. It was located near where the Oak Ridge Civic Center is located today. The structure was demolished

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around 1950, according to Bobby Copeland’s article, *Movie theaters of early Oak Ridge*, published in The Oak Ridger.

The Playtime Theater was located in Happy Valley, the construction camp for K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant, where 15,000 construction workers lived while building that historic structure. Construction began in June 1943 and was completed in early 1945. The camp known as Happy Valley was soon demolished and removed from the site. So, the Playtime Theater would likely have only been open a couple of years from June 1943 to mid-1945.

The Skyway Theater, a drive-in theater was opened by April 4, 1946 as Bobby Copeland found a theater ad in the newspaper advertising the “first outdoor theater in this area and claimed to offer the finest pictures with the largest screen.” I remember the Skyway and recall when it closed in 1980. It was located where Sagebrush restaurant and Kroger’s parking lot is located today. I remember seeing folks who were staying at the Holiday Inn watching movies from outside their rooms on the second floor porches.

Additionally, there was the Elza Drive-In Theater, just outside the Elza Gate which was originally operated by the same people who ran the Skyway and the Birchfield Drive-In Theater just across the Clinch River in Solway. When the water is low, the ridges of the parking areas for the Birchfield theater can still be seen just west of the bridge, if one uses just a bit of imagination.

The managers for the early Oak Ridge theaters up to 1995 were: Walter Morris, August 1943 to March 31, 1947; George B. Odum, April 1947 to (unknown); Milton W. Kress, as early as October 1949 to May 1950; L. W. Bevel, May 1950 to January 30, 1956; Ruth Bevel, April 1956 to 1981; Tanya Preston, 1981 to October 1988; Scotti Kelly, October 1988 to the time the list Gene had was completed – 1995.

Finally, the Tinseltown Theater with 14 screens opened in Oak Ridge on December 11, 1998. The Grove Theater which had just been renovated into a multi-theater complex was closed at this time. It reopened on July 18, 2005 as the High Places Church and they had removed the internal walls again returning the structure to its original configuration.

When operated as a theater, the Grove was the largest venue in town. It held 1,000 people! The High Places Church has a slightly reduced capacity as it did not install hardly as many seats as the original Grove configuration.

Okay, now we have listed the theaters as I have learned them and have identified the managers. There are several other people in addition to Bob and Gene who worked at the theaters and who attended a reunion of Oak Ridge theater workers a few years back. These folks recall their days working at the theaters with a lot of fond memories.

Now, let’s look at a unique piece of history for the Grove Theater. In 1947, the beautiful young 15 year old Elizabeth Taylor starred in her “coming of age” movie after debuting in *National Velvet* at age 12 and then making a nondescript *Courage of Lassie* in 1946 in what turned out to be a supporting role to a collie dog.

The movie was *Cynthia* and it fit the young and determined actress to a tee. She was allowed to incorporate characteristics into the character she admired such as honesty and compassion and her life so paralleled the movie that the role was literally a natural for the sheltered Elizabeth Taylor.

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To promote the movie, the Grove Theater created “CYNTHIA Clubs of America, Oak Ridge Chapter, headquarters Grove Theatre.” There was a contest for all club members with prizes for best answers to a “Vital Cynthia Questionnaire.” You could get the needed information at the Grove Theatre, NOW! Club members got a free autographed photo of Cynthia with membership card. Membership was limited. You needed to register early!

The movie, *CYNTHIA*, was coming to the Grove Theatre on Sunday, September 21, 1947. The membership card had a photograph of Cynthia (Elizabeth Taylor) as shown accompanying this article. The card had a place for the member’s name, the chapter and was signed by Elizabeth Taylor, the National President.

There was as SPECIAL CONTEST with a free photo of Cynthia that was “now open for Cynthia Club members at the Grove Theatre and members should watch and wait for the Anniversary Special...whatever that was.

The advertising for the movie stated, “You’ll fall in love with CYNTHIA. The cry of every hungry heart for a sweetheart echoes in this wonderful love story. How can a lonely girl find a willing boy? How should she act when he kisses her? How can she hold him against the competition of other girls? A grand, exciting story with the heartwarming, down-to-earth feeling, the laughter and tears, that made *The Green Years* great!” I am sure the folks at the time know exactly what was meant by “The Green Years.”

“Join the nationwide CYNTHIA club – for girls between 12 and 18 – You can join this club at the Grove Theatre ONLY – Club members get an 8 X 10 autographed photo of Elizabeth Taylor and – a chance to win a prize.” How? By writing a 25 word statement on any of nine different subjects:

1. At what age should a Cynthia Girl be permitted to have “solo” dates?
2. Should a Cynthia Girl “go steady” with one boyfriend – or should she go out with various friends?
3. Should a Cynthia Girl permit “petting?”
4. At what hour should a Cynthia girl be home from a date?
5. Should a Cynthia Girl introduce her boy friends to her parents – and should she continue seeing a boy of whom they disapprove?
6. Should a Cynthia girl discuss dates and romantic problems with other girls?
7. Because she wants to “go places and do things,” should a Cynthia girl allow a boyfriend to spend money beyond his means?
8. Is it ever fair for a Cynthia Girl to try to “vamp” the boyfriend of a classmate or acquaintance?
9. How much make-up should a Cynthia Girl wear?

The advertising went on to say, “Membership will open on September 15, 1947, in the lobby of the Grove Theatre and the first Cynthia picture in Oak Ridge will be at the GROVE Theatre. Club limited to 1,000 members – join early!”

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A column in The Oak Ridger at the time, *McCarthy’s Corner*, by Thomas F. X. McCarthy, pokes a bit of fun at the Grove Theatre’s advertising. He says “Cynthia is gal with a ‘purty’ face with naught behind it.” He takes several of the above nine subjects and gives his slant on the statement and what likely answers might be.

He ends his column by stating he could do worse than being himself, he could be a girl between 12 and 18 and join this Cynthia Club which would be the “fate worse than death” that his mother warned him about.

Bob Baker and Gene Hicks got a kick out of telling me about this wonderful time in the theater when such advertising brought in the crowds and young girls joined the Cynthia Club in droves. Ah, for the simple pleasures of days gone by!



Cynthia (Elizabeth Taylor at 15 years of age)

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Bob Baker, J. C. Lewis, Ronnie Hayes, Bill Mole and Obie Henegar



Beauford Rae, Bobby Durham, Bobby Powers and Gene Hicks

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Bob Baker, early Oak Ridge Theater assistant manager

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Gene Hicks, early Oak Ridge Theater usher and theater manager