

Gone but not forgotten...

OLD SHADOW PALACES

BY ROBERT L. WHEELER

THE BEGINNINGS of motion picture entertainment in Providence resembled the infancy of an unacknowledged and unwanted child. Here, as elsewhere, it was dubiously regarded by conservative showmen. They sometimes gave it grudging house-room in their vaudeville theaters as a "chaser" to clear the seats for successive audiences, but held it in no affection or esteem.

In 1910, when E. F. Albee acquired the property at 316 Westminster St. which became the Albee Theater and is now the RKO Albee, he said, apropos of the new showhouse he was about to build, "Of its program of attractions I can say nothing except that it will not be any variety of a motion picture show."

At about that time the Nickel Theater, which then occupied the site of Mr. Albee's projected enterprise, was showing *Judith and Holofernes* . . . a thrilling filmization of the beautiful Queen of Judea who first charmed, then slew, the general whose army was besieging her city.

The Nickel Theater was the first movie house in Providence, but not the first theater built expressly for the showing of "animated pictures." That honor goes to the original Bijou Theater, which stood at Orange and Westminster Streets.

Spitz and Nathanson opened the Nickel in 1907. Before that it had been the Park Music Hall, the Park Theater, the Olympic, Lothrop's, and the Gaiety Museum. Mr. Abe Kroll, now 66, who was a property

boy at the Olympic at the start of a backstage career which has since detoured into a florist business near Hoyle Square, recalls entering the Olympic attic one day and being confronted by a Cardiff Giant 20 feet tall. Scared the hell out of him. The Nickel premises had been through a lot of show business before the coming of the movies.

The Providence Amusement Company (in other words, Messrs. Spitz and Nathanson) built the original Bijou Theater as an out-and-out movie house and opened it in 1908, the year after they started the Nickel. No cathedral, it was still a pretty flossy little theater. It had an ornamental front painted white, a triple arch over its principal entrance on Westminster Street, a seating capacity of 407, Cupids on the ceiling and a Powers Improved Flickerless machine showing Animated Pictures, the Craze of the Age. Also there were Illustrated Songs by Talented Vocalists. Who were, at the opening on March 28, 1908, Murray Bernard, baritone, Miss Lillian, soprano, and Miss Emily Blanchard, contralto.

It is significant that the name of the first picture shown by the Bijou is not given, either in the account of the opening or in the ad. In 1908 what you demanded of a motion picture was movement and it usually gave you a good five cents worth.

The Bijou survived almost into the talking picture age. It was torn down in 1925, and its passing was regretted by all. The Nickel Theater kept on showing

the motion pictures which the resolute Mr. Albee would have none of, until 1916, when he had it razed so that he could build a stately theater which is now just another movie house.

The history of the movies in Providence is divided into three periods. There was, first of all, the time when the cinema was a theatrical Cinderella, the step-child with a broom. Then came a period of small movie houses like the Nickel and the Bijou on Westminster and the Scenic and Casino on Mathewson. The Scenic's successor was the Rialto. The Casino was where Shepard's Cafe is now. "Our pictures," its ad proudly proclaimed, "are shown on a glass screen one inch thick, the only one in Rhode Island."

There were others. Many others. They opened. They closed. They are no more. Some of them seated even fewer customers than the Bijou's 407, and were described contemptuously as "store-room theaters," mere holes-in-the-wall.

The third period began around 1915 when the first of the large houses designed especially for pictures was built in downtown Providence. With the Cathedral Age this article is not concerned. But we can tell you what gave it impetus. That was Col. Felix Wendelschafer's presentation of D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* at the Providence Opera House.

The Griffith Reconstruction opus was the first big movie ever shown in Providence and the Colonel had his troubles getting a license to put it on. The Police Commission finally granted him one over the protests of the Providence branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Movie-goers used to modest "chasers" and two- and five-reelers must have been overwhelmed by this first of the super-colossals. There was nothing modest about *The Birth*. It came here from Boston accompanied by a carload of special scenery for the "shadow box" and a 25-piece orchestra. Ten "clearers" were stationed back of the curtain line to do the Lord only knows what, lighting effects were handled by two electricians, and half a dozen men with strong voices and big feet were hired "to produce the noise essential to mob scenes and to give realism to the galloping of the horses and the sounding of the drums."

What's more the ushers were dressed in hoopskirts and the theater entrance was flanked by two fellows of commanding stature, one dressed in Confederate gray, the other in Union blue, and both cold sober.

Let us return to a simpler day. But do not think that the antediluvian movie exhibitors were men without imagination or the quickening spark of genius.

In the early 1900's *The Great Train Robbery*, an early Edison film, was shown in the Providence Music Hall, located in what was later the Public Market and is now an emptiness giving bus passengers on Westminster Street an unobstructed view of the Round Top Church, which is good for their souls.

WHEN the Music Hall had wrung as many nickels as it could out of this early crime movie, some inspired showman took it to Crescent Park and put it on in a small theater built in the form of a railroad passenger coach.

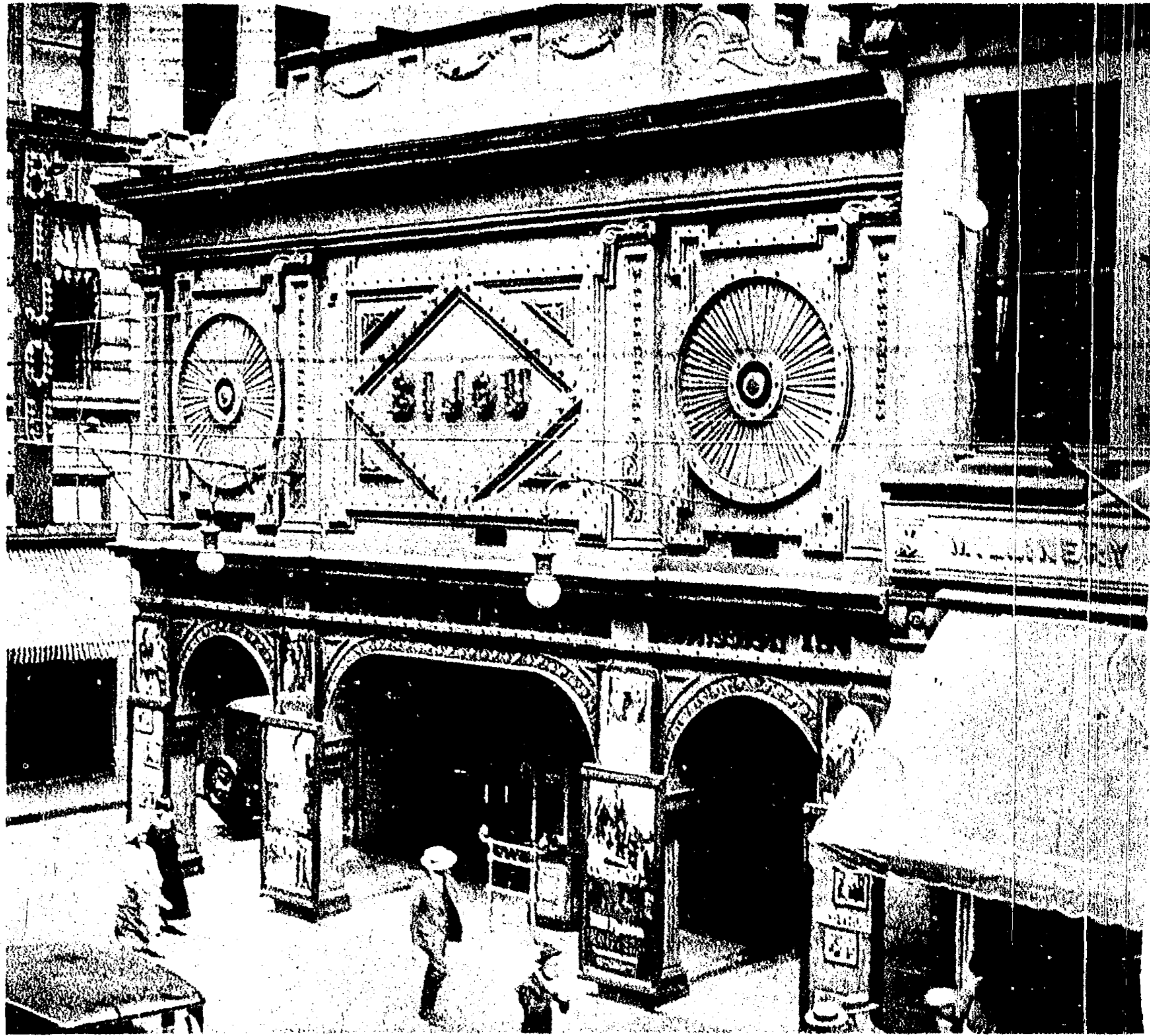
He installed the motion picture machine at one end of the coach, facing the aisle and a double row of seats flanking it. When the seats were filled he projected the picture through a screen giving the "passengers" an illusion of being on a moving train rushing through mountain defiles. Presently, out of the gulches and gorges rode bandits who galloped down the track waving pistols; and into the coach rushed



THE NICKEL in 1916. 'The Call of the Tribo,' an Indian drama in two parts, was showing at Providence's Popular Family Theater, also 'A Daring Getaway.' All Seats Five Cents, We Show the Best and Latest.



GRAMP'S PINUP GAL. Theda Bara playing whom but Cleopatra in 'Cleopatra.' Howl, wolves!



THE BIJOU in June, 1925. On July 3 it went out of business and wrecking started July 5, but as of former date Bill Patton was there in 'Fighting Through,' admission 15 cents. Also 'Lightning Romance.'

ushers; masked, shouting, brandishing weapons, collecting admissions. That boy should have gone further, and maybe he did.

In the old Nickel Theater, Mr. Abe Kröll says, movies were projected by an Edison Star machine. As the film was run off, it dropped into a basket and in the event of fire or other emergency the operator was supposed to grab this basket and make for the nearest exit. The early movie houses were without operators' booths. The machine was placed either in the center aisle, just back of the balcony, or on the balcony rail.

Bullock's Theater on Richmond Street had no screen. Its pictures were simply thrown on a plastered wall, across which a red curtain was drawn during the variety acts which alternated with such pictures as *The Invisible Power*, a four-act mystery movie.

Bullocks was located about where Loew's is now. It was an upstairs theater over a bowling alley. It possessed no Alhambra gewgaws and no lobby. The box office was at street level on Richmond and two narrow flights of stairs presented a golden opportunity to ambitious young pickpockets.

One of the acts which played there in Mr. Abe Kröll's day was presented by a young squirt named Fred Allen. It was a juggling act. Kröll claims he and some others got Allen to liven it up with chatter, thinks that may have fired the spark that made Allen the great ad-libber he later became.

Bullocks was typical of the small movie houses of Providence. They constituted a phase of show business here which has left few or no traces. People remember them and sometimes two people remember the same one and locate it in two different streets. Movie critic Paul Howland recalls one on Empire Street that had a masked singer. Mr. Abe Kröll says no, it was on Westminster Street and it was called the Lyric and I'll tell you the singer's name in a minute.

Joe Hurl, the former repertoire actor, recalls the

Windsor at Randall and Charles. And there were the Pastime in Olneyville and at least three movie houses on Atwells Avenue, including another Bijou—in the Calderone building—and La Sirena at No. 375.

By 1919 most of them had folded and of the more modest cinema shops there remained only La Sirena, the Bijou and the Casino. The motion picture theater had come of age—physically at least. "Nearly all fans," wrote an observer that year, "can remember when they sneaked into a movie theater to avoid being seen. Now they drive boldly up in limousines."



OLD MOVIE FANS of Providence may recall La Pickford's debut in 'The New York Hat.'



MOVIE IDOL of locals in 1914 was Dustin Farnum in 'The Squaw Man,' original version.

Just a moment
PLEASE
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OPERATOR
CHANGES A REEL