

THE GOOD OLD DAYS IN HULL-DAISETTA....

DAISETTA MOVIE THEATER **HOUSED MANY MEMORIES**

Phil Carrico



DAISETTA THEATER DRAWS CROWD IN 1930'S

Preface: This story indicates the tremendously fast growth of Daisetta during the boom.

On July 15, 1924, a cartel of businessmen from the Daisetta area requested a charter, with all rules and regulations binding, that was approved by then – secretary of state, SL Staples, on August 1, 1924. The corporation was named Daisetta Building Association and the board members of the original charter included: Amel Abel, Hubert Taylor, M.D. Hall, Joe B. Farris, E.B. Maske and W.H. Hermes.

The first meeting of the board of directors was held in the office of Judge Llewellyn in Liberty, Texas on August 13, 1924. At this meeting the first slate of officers was elected: President, W. H. Hermes, Vice President, E. B. Maske, and Sec-Treasurer, M. D. Hall.

The corporation offered up 150 shares of stock at \$100 per share. The shares were sold in a short time and with the \$15,000 dollars that rolled into the coffers – land was purchased and building commenced.

The building, completed in 1925, was constructed of brick and ran north and south along the eastside of Main Street in Daisetta for 148 feet (or half a football field). The building was 60 feet deep from west to east except for the extreme south end which was to be a theater. That end went 80 feet deep and was the only double wide space, being 37 feet wide. The remaining 6 spaces in the building were 18.5 feet wide by 60 feet deep. However, if a businessman needed more room he could rent two spaces and take the partition out.

I have done everything I know to find out who the original leaseholder of the Daisetta Theater was – to no avail. (After reading this, I'm sure several people will come forward with the information). We do know that the theater was in operation from 1925 – but for the first 7 years after it opened, we do not know who ran or leased it. We know the Milentz family leased the theater from 1932 until 1955 and that a Mr. Stone operated it for the last two years of its life – from 1955 until '57, when it closed for good.

Elva (Fregia) Greak had eight years of memories from the old theater. Elva worked as ticket taker and popcorn girl at the theater seven days a week from 1942 until '50. Elva remembers the night her good friend (who will remain nameless) went in to see a movie halfway through the first show. He had to stay halfway through the second show to see the part he'd missed. On getting up to leave and walking over people's feet to get to the aisle, his front was brushing the heads of people sitting in the row ahead. The man's belt caught a hair net from a lady's head as he came out and he walked into the lobby with the hair net hanging down his fly.

What made the situation so humorous was the fact that the lobby was crammed with people waiting for the midnight show and Elva asking loudly: "whatcha got hanging"? Needless to say, Mr.--- didn't show his face around the area for some time.

The Daisetta Theater fattened more hogs during those years than anyone in the area. Theatergoers were accustomed to coming out of the late show and seeing 15 to 30 hogs crowded around the entrance. Of course, they were waiting for the popcorn machine to be cleaned, for then the hogs were fed the excess popcorn. I suppose this nightly ritual continued until the stock law was passed some time in the early '50s. Many old timers have told me that, in later years, going to the theater was not the same because something seemed to be missing when they came out of the theater.

Mr. and Mrs. Bussy managed the theater for all those years and Elva remembers the night, in 1943, when Mr. Bussy died in the ticket booth. Some of the people who worked at the theater over the years were projectionists – J.B. Kirkindall, Jake Watson, George Meadows and George Kellog. Popcorn girl/ ticket taker/ ticket seller - Elva Fregia, Clarence Fregia, Bonnie Jean Fregia, Betty Neely, Dorothy Ivey, Mrs. Cornell and Sub manager, Mrs. Joe B. Farris.

I asked Elva, in her years of service, what was the biggest crowd – and without blinking an eye, she said, "Every Saturday night". - Elva related that during her eight years and before and after as far as she can remember – every Saturday night was a sellout.

Another story happened on a cold foggy night in February sometime in the late '40s. Elva and some of the gang were standing outside the theater talking – when all of a sudden large objects began coming down out of the fog and landing on Main Street. The

night a thousand Canadian geese landed on Main Street in Daisetta was a night to remember – however it scared Elva and friends half to death.

Then there was the night some of the boys put highlite on one of the hogs and he ran into the theater screaming – according to Elva that was the fastest emptying of the theater on record.

The colored folks had the balcony of the old theater all to themselves – I don't know what all went on up there, but I've often wondered...

Oil Field Willie was one of the most notable characters in the Hull-Daisetta area for many years and the old Daisetta Theater was one of his stomping grounds. According to Bob Milentz, a good way to empty the theater was for Willie just to come in. (Someday a book should be written about Willie).

According to the old Daisetta Building Association logbook that showed the first entry in 1924, the following is interesting: In 1927, of the 150 shares, 19 people were shown as shareholders. In 1944, 17 years later – only 9 people held all the shares and by 1985 ten people hold the existing shares of the old Association. Evidently, over the years, the shares were bought, sold and traded on a regular bases.

In 1944 the Association housed the following businesses: Daisetta theater, Kelly's cafe, Drug store, Thelma Farris beauty shop, Garland Craig barber shop, Abrham's dry good store, U.S. Post Office, J.K. Seale liquor store and a domino hall.

By 1985 – of a once booming business enterprise, only two businesses still hold out and rented from the association. Johnny Massingale and his wife run a resale store in what once was a liquor store and the U.S. post office – and Clara Lambarth operated a beauty shop, perhaps the same shop that Thelma farris ran so many years ago.

In early September of '85 after the theater had been closed for a number of years, I had the opportunity, once again, to go inside the old Theater. As I entered the building I didn't see the cobwebs – I was stealing Harold Bay's popcorn and dropping it down the back of Jean William's dress, who was sitting in front of us. I didn't see the gutted out seats – I was ducking a rabbit punch from Jack Johnson and shushing Jenny Lee Saddler so I could hear what the Lone Ranger was telling Tonto. I didn't see the broken glass, the great screen in tatters or the monster rats – I was reliving a time of beauty and a time of joy.

The old Daisetta Theater was an instrument of joy and entertainment for generations of us Big Thicket folk and if we wait long enough, "Destry will ride again"...

POSTSCRIPT: As of this date (June, 2008), twenty years plus after I wrote the article – the only thing left of the Association building is the cement slab on which it sat...