
The Brunson Theater and the End of an Era

by Amanda Dillard,
Lee College

With the opening of New York City's Regent Theater in 1913, the first American movie palace, Americans made the movie theaters top in the entertainment business. The movies were a place of escape. One could go to the movies and suspend reality for a time to enjoy watching Rudolph Valentino, as "*The Sheik*," seduce a young woman or watch Captain Rhett Butler and Scarlet O'Hara fall in love. The venues showing these movies have evolved over time from beautiful, one-screen palaces to high-priced, multi-screened theater complexes. The alteration of the movie experience signified a change in society that would destroy the very symbol of its innocence, a symbol that is reflected by the Brunson Theater in Baytown, Texas.

Baytown, Texas is the result of three cities—Baytown, Pelly, and Goose Creek—consolidating in 1947. "The town of Baytown, Texas as it is known today was founded on January 24, 1948." ¹ It is located some thirty miles east of Houston on the western end of Trinity Bay.

When oil was discovered in 1908, Baytown was destined to become an industrial city. The directors of Humble Oil & Refining Company built the first oil refinery in 1915. One of the largest refineries in the world at the time, it influenced the growth of Baytown. Over the years the population increased from 20,000 to almost 67,000. Since a majority of

the residents worked at the refinery all day, a large number sought a release at the end of the day. They would find their release in the movies.

In 1890, after Thomas Edison had invented the phonograph, he predicted that movies would "provide home entertainment for families of wealth." ² It did not turn out this way though. America was turning into an urban industrial society and social alterations were occurring too. America became a place whose people were distinguished by clothes, religion, and the jobs they held. Classes were separated from each other and rarely intermingled. The wealthy had a monopoly on entertainment. They had country clubs, live theater and sports, while the working class only had their church gatherings and maybe a few clubs and lodges within the neighborhood. According to Robert Sklar, "Edison's kinetoscope peep show arrived in 1893, and in 1896, large-screen motion picture projection debuted. The movies moved into vaudeville houses and penny arcades, and within a decade had found a secure and profitable home in working-class neighborhood storefront theaters." ³ Thus a "medium of mass popular culture" ⁴ was born.

An ingenious architecture of illusion grew up to house the fantastic new invention called the movies." ⁵ The theaters were built with a certain pizzazz to them so that when viewers entered, they could leave time behind and just enjoy the experience of the movie. Many

movie theaters were built with a theme to add to the experience. Theaters such as Grauman's Chinese and Grauman's Egyptian would use exotic themes to reel in the audience and create a movie experience to remember.

In reality, the show started outside the theater. According to John Margolies and Emily Gwathmey, "Movie theater architects were pioneers in the promotional use of electric lights." ⁶ Art deco marquees that lit up were prevalent on the face of movie palaces. Canopies on the steps outlined with bulbs only added to the illusion of escape. "The ticket booth was the centerpiece of a composition of design refinements and details intended to add to the overall glamorous first impression. Colorful swirls of terrazzo tiles decorated the sidewalk beneath the marquee and led to doorways graced by snazzy railings and curvilinear glass."⁷ By 1945, there were more than four thousand movie palaces across America and countless smaller theaters were slowly becoming American icons.

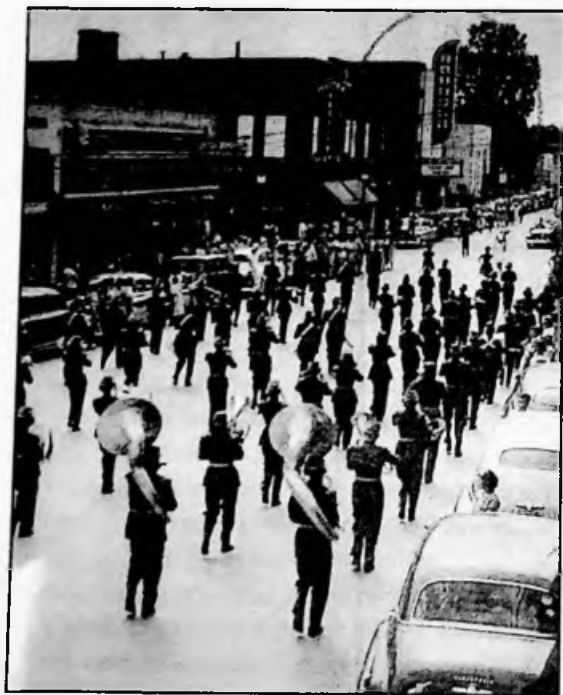


Photo courtesy of the Baytown Sun

Opening Day at the Brunson Theater, 1952

Small town America offered very few things to do on a Saturday night beyond a couple of movie houses in town and maybe a local burger joint. According to Margolies and Gwathmey, "being cut off from the many cultural and recreational alternatives offered in larger places meant that the ritual of going to the movies in a small town was not only all the more significant but it was also just about the only game in town."⁸ The movies were not just for adults and teens though. Many children went to the movies, too; the special event for them was the Saturday Matinee.

The kiddie shows became a feature tradition of many small town theaters. As Margolies and Gwathmey observed, they would show "hour after hour of cartoons, serials, newsreels, one or two features, and sometimes even host a visiting celebrity from the land of make-believe."⁹ The Saturday morning adventure serials usually consisted of a story involving a hero and a villain. No matter what the situation was at the end of the chapter though, the hero always managed to come back the next week, completely unharmed. Quite often parents would drop off their children at the kiddie show with about twenty-five cents. With that they could get tickets for the movie, buy some popcorn and candy, and enjoy the day. This scene was a typical Saturday morning in many town theaters including Baytown's Brunson Theater.

According to the opening day program, the Brunson Theater was "the eighth member of the East Texas Theaters-H.E. Brunson family of movie houses."¹⁰ It opened its doors to the public on Tuesday, August 23, 1949 with a salute to Mr. H.E. Brunson, the proud owner and builder of the Brunson Theater. After introducing local celebrities, an auction was held for the first ticket. All auction proceeds were donated to the Baytown Volunteer Fire Department. After the auction, the reigning Miss Texas opened the cellophane curtains and

the box office opened.

The opening day program described the Brunson's "black sidewalk of iridescent concrete with designs in aluminum strips. [There was a] brilliantly lighted marquee in 'V' shaped design, each side five feet high and thirty feet long, made of solid porcelain enamel beautifully decorated in hues of brown, green, and cream, illuminated by colorful rose, green, and red Neon tubing."¹¹ Once inside, prior to the official start of the movie, a period of inspection allowed the audience to admire the beauty of their new theater. The Brunson theater came complete with a foyer, (at the time) futuristic decorations, 1,200 Kroehler push back seats, a balcony, Mirrophonic sound, Motiograph projectors, a 17x22 foot Silver Plastic Sound Screen, and a 100-Ton Carrier Refrigeration Air Conditioning System.

After the close inspection, the audience was ushered into the auditorium for the opening act. First, there was an introduction of honored guests and a presentation of the theater. Via a pre-recorded specialty dance, Miss Texas would be the first person to grace the silver screen at the Brunson. The first feature length movie to be shown was *Yes Sir, That's My Baby* with Donald O'Connor, Gloria De Haven, and Charles Coburn. Proudly, Howard Brunson observed the success of his movie theater on the first night.

According to Wanda Orton, Howard E. Brunson "started out in the mercantile business in Baytown in 1924 but soon got his first taste of running a movie theater."¹² In Brunson's book about the history of Baytown local theaters he said, "In the summer of 1926 I became aware that I needed to quit the mercantile business. I decided to go into the theater field 100 percent."¹³ Brunson became a major force in the movie business of Baytown. He cooperated in the creation of a firm known as the "East Texas Theaters & H.E. Brunson." From the late 1920's to the early 1980's this



Photo courtesy of the Sterling Library

Opening Day Program

firm controlled many of the theaters located in Baytown and the surrounding areas. Brunson stated in his book that his aim was to give the people "every advantage in the moving picture entertainment world that can be offered in any city in the country."¹⁴

Although the Brunson Theater was owned by Brunson, it was operated by Rufus Honeycutt. Honeycutt's son, also named Rufus, recalls, "In the 50's, movies were promoted heavily by the movie companies. We received press releases, posters, props, and visits from stars. [*Davy Crockett*] was one of the most popular movies ever at the Brunson."¹⁵ Honeycutt pulled off many stunts to bring the public into the theater. At one point Honeycutt had one of his ushers get on top of the marquee and threaten to jump. Expecting everyone in town to gather at the theater to wait for him to jump, the usher was supposed to appear to change his mind, and decide instead to see a movie. Honeycutt's son remembered this and related, "The fire department and police showed up. The police chief was in on the

stunt, but had failed to tell anyone else before he went to Houston and he was late returning. Needless to say Dad thought he was in real trouble for the false alarm.”¹⁶ Honeycutt experimented with many things. Two of the strange stunts he pulled were to have a drawing for a piglet to attract housewives and a paid funeral policy for a midnight horror show. For the kiddie shows, Honeycutt would host various competitions and entertainment such as hula-hoop contests, Davy Crocket imitations, visits by wrestlers, and even dance contests when Elvis Presley reigned as the popular teen idol.

During its heyday, the Brunson Theater was one of the main hangouts for local children and teenagers. Many local residents recall seeing movies there as children. A Houstonian, Nelda Hutchison, reminisced about the Brunson in an interview. She said, “I don’t remember much but I do remember going to see the kiddie shows. I would order pickle juice and popcorn at the concession stand every time. They used to sell sour pickles but everybody started wanting the juice instead. They served it in the paper cones with Hawaiian shaved ice. Kind of like a snow cone, only with pickle juice instead of snow cone syrup.”¹⁷



Photo courtesy of the Baytown Sun

Kiddie Matinee at the Brunson Theater, 1952

John Britt, a professor of history at Lee College, related that he and a group of his friends skipped school one day to see the Marlon Brando film, *The Wild One*. In the opening scene, Brando rides a motorcycle down a long road with many other bikers following him. After seeing the film, John Odom, now an attorney and municipal judge, suggested they use this first scene to play a joke on “old Honeycutt.” Britt continues, “We strapped some cards to the spokes of a friend’s bicycle and took our places at two of the doors in the auditorium. One of our buddies let the guy with the bike in the theater from one door and when the opening scene began, he biked his way down the aisle with the cards rattling on the spokes. Honeycutt was right behind him, hollering and chasing him out the door. It was hilarious.”¹⁸

At the start of the Cold War came a fear of nuclear war and anything that had to do with communism. McCarthyism took over and the House Un-American Activities Commission trials began. Robert Sklar noted that when HUAC targeted Hollywood and the “great population shift to the suburbs began, the producers shaped their responses with the idea of retaining a foundation of support that in reality did not exist. Unwittingly they helped to turn away their principal audience.”¹⁹ With the advent of television, audience depletion worsened. People no longer needed to go to the movies for entertainment; they had it in their own homes. Producer, Samuel Goldwyn dared to say what Hollywood didn’t want to accept: “It is a certainty that people will be unwilling to pay to see poor pictures when they can stay home and see something which is, at least, no worse.”²⁰ With advancements in technology and changing public tastes, movies no longer appealed to the mass public. In the early 1980s the development of the VHS player worsened the problem of depleting movie attendance. Fewer would pay to see a film in the theater when the family could watch it at

home for the price of one movie ticket. Hollywood was dying and it was dying quickly. Not only was Hollywood facing the dilemma of technological change, it was facing social constrictions as well. The Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 held that the doctrine of "separate but equal" was constitutional. Their decision was based on the fact that the United States government could not regulate social customs. These "social customs" that they argued over were in connection to railway cars, but the court's decision led white Americans to believe they could apply the "separate but equal" doctrine to everything. This doctrine reached from the original railway cars to schools and even seeped into the small town theaters. At the Brunson, blacks were made to sit in the balcony. They were allowed to come down to buy concessions but were required to return to the balcony immediately afterwards. This policy held true at the Brunson until the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. After *Brown v. Board of Education* overturned the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, integration was forced onto American society. John Britt remembered when this integration was carried out at the Brunson. It was his first year at Lee College as a professor and, as an adult, he found it exciting to sit in the balcony for the first time as whites were not allowed to sit in the balcony before integration.

Little by little, attendance dropped to an all time low. Small town theaters began to close nationwide. In Baytown, the Palace, the Alamo, and the Arcadia—all theaters owned by the Brunson's movie firm—were closed in the same year. The Brunson survived the movie decline until 1982 when it finally closed its doors.

According to Margolies and Gwathmey, today many of the little theaters across the nation are surviving as nightclubs, churches, bowling alleys and even pornography houses.²¹ Sadly, though, many stand today as reminders



Photo courtesy of Amanda Dillard

The Brunson Theater, 2006

of an era gone by and long forgotten. Today they entertain no one but the pigeons that get in through holes in the roof and the local community of mice and rats. The Brunson is one of those many theaters that still stand today as a dream of what once was.

After closing, the Brunson was passed from owner to owner, at one time slipping through the fingers of Lee College, the local community college. Eventually in 1997, the city foreclosed on it for more than \$15,000 in back taxes. When the local residents realized what had happened, they banded together and began fighting for the restoration of the Brunson. Many of the former children who often went to see the Saturday matinee were part of the effort to restore it. They believed that if the city of Baytown would combine efforts with area businesses, they could once again have a place where Baytown residents could meet and seek family entertainment and fellowship after a hard day's work at the, now many, local refineries. In a joint effort with the Goose Creek Historical Foundation, residents managed to rid the local landmark of debris and to clean the face of the building. It seemed as though things were looking up for the Brunson, but it would have to fight an industrial city bent on modernization.

In 1999, the Baytown Assistant City Manager Herb Thomas, recommended the demolition of the Brunson Theater in July of that year. Even though the Brunson could be considered a historical landmark, he believed the cost of renovating it was just too overpowering to ignore. It was estimated to cost more than \$600,000 even though the building itself was valued at only \$44,000 by the Harris County Tax Appraisal District. Along with Thomas, many of the city officials believed that the Brunson had become more of a liability than an asset. Bill Harrison, a member of the Goose Creek Historical Foundation vowed, "If they try to [demolish the Brunson], I'm going to raise as much hell as I can."²² Other community members felt the same and rallied behind Harrison all the way to the end. Harrison and the Baytown residents that supported him won the battle and the theater was not demolished. The fervor for the effort eventually died down though because of lack of support from the city officials.

In October of 2001, news about the Brunson Theater resurfaced as the mayor of Baytown placed the Brunson on the auction block. With the sale of the theater the mayor hoped that renovation would again be a hot topic for the Brunson. Apparently, the plan succeeded. In December of that year, a petition to save the Brunson was circulated. Many of the local residents maintained that a restored Brunson would bring about a restoration of Texas Avenue, a street that at one time had been the heart of the city. The petition gained over 1,500 signatures, but once again, the hope of a restored Brunson did not last long. In 2002, a Baytown man set his sights on converting the now roofless movie house into a shooting range. David Alford had owned and

operated the Texas Concealed Weapons Academy on Texas Avenue next door to the theater since 1995. Another strong supporter of reviving Texas Avenue was a man by the name of Joe Wheat. When hearing about Alford's plan for the Brunson he said, "I am opposed to another shooting range on Texas Avenue. That's not the kind of business we need down here."²³ After the debate over the Brunson "shooting range" became a hot topic, another man by the name of Sheley argued that he wanted to save the building and make it a center for performing arts. The theater was being torn between futures and it seemed as if it would never get anywhere.

Today, the Brunson still has not been renovated, yet it remains a topic of discussion among residents. However, many small town theaters were not even lucky enough to be the subject of discussion as to their future. Most of the theaters were demolished and in their places stand multi-screened cinema giants. Companies such as Cinemark and AMC have built cookie-cutter theaters all over the nation. The movie experience of before has been forgotten in the corporate push to turn a profit.

The destruction of the small town theater symbolized a dying era. It was an era of innocence when seeing a movie was a community and family occasion. Regrettably, Americans will never again enjoy the experience of seeing a movie at theaters like the Brunson. Never again will they be able to innocently watch an old *Captain America* serial without criticizing the believability of what takes place. They will only be able to look on those old movie houses like the Brunson and remember the experience of seeing a movie in the heyday of small town theaters.

END NOTES

¹ City of Baytown Texas, "History of Baytown."

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³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John Margolies and Emily Gwathmey, *Ticket to Paradise: American Movie Theaters and How We Had Fun* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1991).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *Brunson Grand Opening Souvenir Program. The Management of the Brunson Theater.* (Baytown, TX. 1949).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Wanda Orton, "H.E. Brunson—The Movie Theater

Man," *Baytown Sun*, August 24, 1949.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Wanda Orton, "Theater Manager's Son Shares Memories." *Baytown Sun*, September 6, 1964.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Nelda Hutchison, interview with the author, Houston, Texas, November 15, 2005.

¹⁸ John Britt, interview with the author, Baytown, Texas, October 12, 2005.

¹⁹ Sklar, *Movie-Made America..*

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Margolies, and Gwathmey. *Ticket to Paradise.*

²² Jim Werbe, "Historian Vows to 'Raise Hell' if City Razes Landmark." *Baytown Sun*, June 13, 1999.

²³ Whit Snyder, "Baytown Man Sets Sights on Converting Roofless Moviehouse into Shooting Range," *Baytown Sun*, January 13, 2002.