

The Princess Theatre

By The Prescott Museum & Visitor Centre

Did you know that for much of the early 20th century, Prescott had its own movie theatre? Located at 254 King Street West, where the Seaway Valley Pharmacy is now, a movie theatre used to be there a mere century ago.

Although the concept of feature films dates to the 1890s, the popularization of media type did not occur until the 1910s. The rise of film stars such as Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford created a new age of film, transforming small novelty clips into full hour-long features. The growth of the film industry expanded quickly across the globe, with many movie theatres popping up in many towns and cities throughout the mid-to-late 1910s.

Prescott was one of these towns to capitalize on the mass revenue drawn by this new wave of entertainment in the 1910s. The Gem Theatre opened to the public in November 1918, to much celebration. Owned and operated by W. E. McAskin, the Gem Theatre was built with luxury in mind. Serving as both a movie theatre and indoor playhouse, the 300-capacity venue featured velvet décor, state-of-the-art lighting and sound systems, and neon signage. The Gem Theatre's opening play was "An Alien" starring George Beban. Original pricing for the theatre was 10c for an afternoon matinee, and in the evening 20c for adults and 15c for children. Like many theatres of the time, attendees could purchase goods from the snack bar, such as popcorn, 1-cent candies and soda. The theatre's first "blockbuster" film was Charlie Chaplin's "A Dog's Life", making its debut on November 29th, 1918. The Gem Theatre continued to operate as a dual venue throughout the 1920s and 1930s, showcasing movies, plays, musicals, opera, orchestra and magic shows.



Example of advertisement for the Princess Theatre's Weekly Features. Circa 1940s.

During the silent film era, the theater owner hired a band to play music to accompany the films. In the 1920's Jim Laschinger, a teenager from Prescott, played in this band. His younger brother Gordon helped the band set up their equipment to see the films for free.

The property was purchased by J.O. Scott in 1938 and underwent extensive remodeling, including the addition of apartments upstairs, updated ticket booths and snack bars, and improved projector and sound systems. Opening to the public on November 15th, 1938, the theatre, now named the Princess Theatre, put an emphasis on the showing of movies over plays. The theatre remained under the ownership of the Scott family for much of the 1940s, with Frank Scott and Stewart Scott both being listed as owners of the business through the decade. Other owners of the theatre included Ed Francis and Mr. St. Pierre. Ed Francis, who was the longest tenured owner/operator of the Princess Theatre from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, brought many changes to the theatre. These changes included raising the prices of tickets by 5 cents, hosting Horrorama's on Friday and Saturday nights during the summer months, and creation of "children's day," showing only cartoon and children's programming on select Saturdays throughout the year. Francis was also said to have operated the projector himself from time to time, often shutting off films early if the guests in attendance got too rowdy during the movie.

THE PRINCESS THEATRE (PRESCOTT)		PRESENTS ITS SPRING PARADE OF HITS!	
FRIDAY - SATURDAY MAY 30—31	MONDAY - TUESDAY JUNE 2—3	WEDNESDAY - THURSDAY JUNE 4—5	
TWO BIG HITS— Van Heflin and Patricia Neal in "WEEK END WITH FATHER"	June Haver and Wm. Lundigan in "LOVE NEST"	Margaret Lockwood in "HIGHLY DANGEROUS"	
SECOND BIG HIT Joel McCrea in "Cattle Drive" in color	SECOND BIG HIT Greer Garson and Walter Pidgeon in "Law and the Lady"	SECOND BIG HIT Jack Carson in "Mr. Universe"	

In the theatre's later years, the business went under another name change, to the "Prescott Theatre" for much of the 1960s. Introducing live theatre back into the venue, the Prescott Theatre hosted several local productions and events each year, with the largest being RCA Victor's annual Christmas party, featured a movie screening for the workers of the plant's families and an opportunity to meet Santa.

THE PRINCESS THEATRE (PRESCOTT)		BRINGS YOU MANY HOURS OF HAPPINESS	
FRIDAY - SATURDAY APRIL 4—5	MONDAY - TUESDAY APRIL 7—8	WEDNESDAY - THURSDAY APRIL 9—10	
2 SWELL HITS JOHN DEREK DONA REED JOHNNY WEISMULLER in "Saturday's Hero" "Fury of the Congo"	A BIG DAZZLING MUSICAL SHOW!  "Two Tickets to Broadway"	ACADEMY AWARD WINNER! HUMPHREY BOGART in "Sirocco" 2nd SMASH HIT— "Rookie Firemen"	

Many Prescott youth found employment at the theatre during its operation, with known ushers at the theatre being Harvey Pitt, Wendy St. Louis, Eric Keeler, Margrit Keeler, Jean Dufour, Gordon McCrady and Jim Dumphey. Mr. Geneviesiou served as a longtime film operator, and Mrs. Bingham was the organ player. During this era, the building, like several other properties along King Street, fell into disrepair. Accompanied by growing inflation, ticket prices increased from 25c to 35c on average, and with more of the public owning television, the theatre struggled to maintain consistent business.



The decision was made to shutter the theatre's doors for good in early 1967. Upon the theatre's closure, the property was purchased by Owen L. Loyd, of Loyd's Pharmacy, who constructed the building that stands at 254 King Street West today. Many artifacts connected to the Princess Theatre remain lost to time. What is known is that much of the seating in the theatre was used at the original Prescott Recreational Complex (now known as the Leo Boivin Community Centre), while much of the theatre's projection equipment was taken by the Geneviesiou family to be used for an unnamed theatre in Ottawa. These actions give some closure to a forgotten part of Prescott's history.



The Prescott Museum & Visitor Centre
Open Wednesday - Saturday, 11-5
202 King Street West, Prescott, ON

