

The "Star Theatre" on the Army side

On the north side of the Army side parade square, next to the drill hall, was the building on the Army side many kids probably remember best, namely the "Star Theatre". The Saturday matinee was the highlight of the week. Before the movie, having all the kids together gave them a chance to indulge in their other favorite activities.

One of these activities was playing marbles which is much better a pastime that most educational experts would like us to believe. Who has not heard some adult cry out to their kids to stop wasting time playing marbles and get into the house to do their homework. But do they not understand the value of playing that wonderful game? First of all, the hand-eye coordination required to throw a marble in the general direction of the "pot" is not to be underestimated. Being able to judge the distance to the pot is also a skill to be learned. Again, not all marbles have the same value. A round ordinary marble was worth much less than a "cats eye", while a large steel ball-bearing from a bulldozer engine might be worth 40-50 smaller marbles, depending on the combination of inferior marbles offered. So kids learned to judge relative value, how to count, how to negotiate and - much more importantly - how not to get "sucked in".

The other main activity as they waited for the cinema to open was trading comic books. There were two main types of comic books, the "ordinary" ones and the great classics. The "ordinary" ones fell into five main categories :

- the war stories such as "Terry and the Pirates" which told the story of a pilot of a piston engine fighter
- the cowboy stories in which the heroes were Lash Larue, Hopalong Cassidy, the Lone Ranger and his Indian friend Tonto (who called him Kemo Sabe), Roy Rogers, Red Ryder and Gene Autry. It is interesting to note that the Lone Ranger movies were shot closed to the Mexican border and that word "Tonto" in Spanish means dumb. Was this a coincidence or indicative of the times?
- the super hero comics with characters such as Superman, Batman and the Green Hornet who could save the world from criminals, space monsters and asteroids with equal ease
- the cops-and-robbers stories such as the famous Dick Tracy

- the funnies which included the boxer "Al Palooka", "Blondie and Dagwood" and "Archie".

On the other hand, the "great classics" seemed to have more substance. And they did because they were based on - the great classics! They translated into a graphic form many of the best novels of the western world, such as "Gulliver's Travels", "Robinson Crusoe", "Swiss Family Robinson" and "the Last of the Mohicans".

This is another case where the educational experts often went wrong when they said that comics were an inferior type of literature. But how many kids effortlessly learned to read as they raced through their comics to find out how Superman managed to survive after being affected by Kryptonite, the only substance that **w**eakened his powers?

The Star Theatre was unpretentious inside as it was on the outside. The seats were basically like church pews, not in the best of shape but comfortable enough for a gang of rowdy kids with their bottles of coke, popcorn and candy bars.

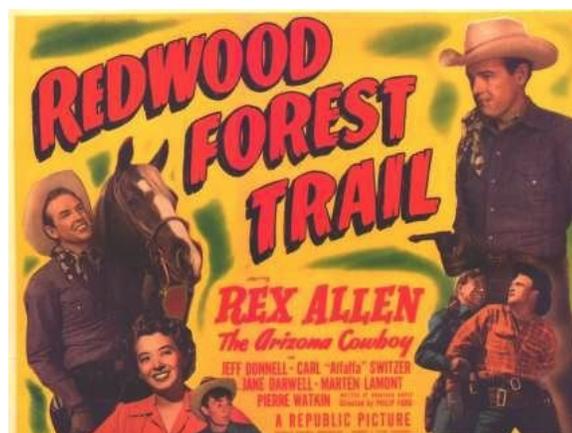
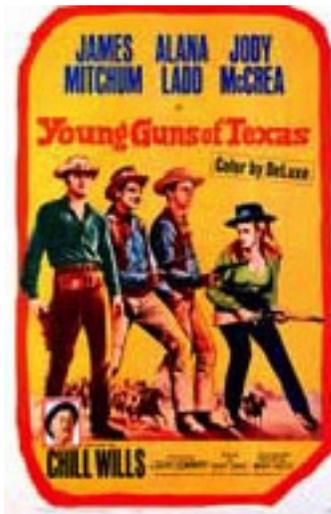


Fig 1 : the Star Theatre

The Saturday matinee was almost always a cowboy movie, a war story or a comedy. The stars in the cowboy movies were often the same ones we read about in our comics but there was sometimes someone else like Randolph Scott, Rex Allen, John Wayne, Johnny Mack Brown, Tex Ritter or Alan Ladd. In these movies, the good guy usually wore a white hat while the villain's hat was black and frequently the same applied to the horses, the best example being the Lone Ranger's horse Silver. The good guy always got the girl, the girl lying on the railway track always got saved and the hero always jumped out on the stagecoach before it went over the hill.

The hats and horses were not the only stereotypes. Many of these western movies had as enemy the Indians of the west. They were portrayed mostly as cunning but naive, friendly to animals while savage with Whites and able to talk only in grunts or incomplete sentences, in the style. "White man take horse" or "Running Fox not give up, Running Fox kill white man". One can only imagine the effect of this incessant treatment of Native people as an inferior race on the attitudes on young kids

Fig 2. Posters of cowboy movies



in the late 40s and early 50s, the Second world war was still fresh in everybody's mind and movies from that era were often replayed along with others made in the following years. While they were destined for an adult audience they occasionally were shown in the matinees. The heroes were often the cowboys done up in another costume but nobody seemed to mind! Other names were however added, some of the best known being James Cagney, Cliff Robertson, Cary Grant. Errol Flynn and Rod Steiger. From memory, the actresses whose hearts they tried to capture included Veronica Lake, Claudette Colbert, Lana Turner, Ann Sothern, Joan Crawford and, the most beautiful of them all, Rita Hayworth.,

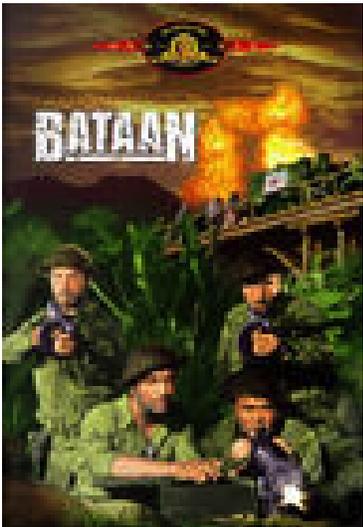
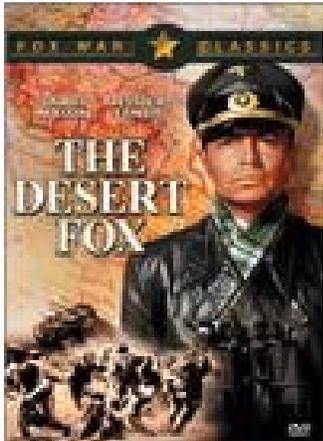
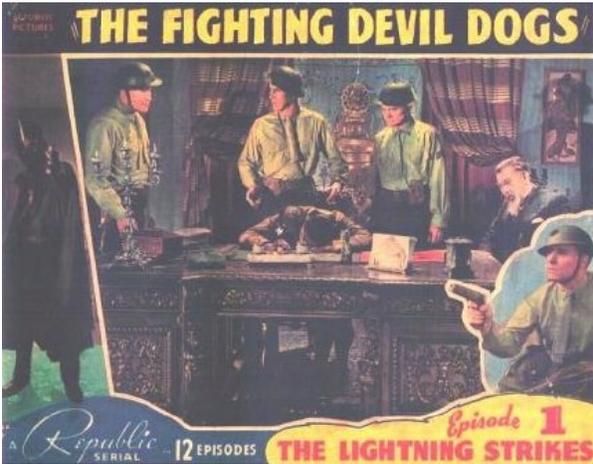


Fig 3 War movie posters 40s-50s

The movies seen kids were not always dramatic stories with great heroes. The lighter, sillier, quackier side of life was also standard fare. Given the clients that were targeted, this was certainly not what could be called "quiet British humour"! Jokes were evident and slapstick was the order of the day. And even though you could see the joke coming a mile away, it still got a laugh not only from kids but also from the grown-ups. Maybe in those days coming out of World War Two, anything that was not bad news was welcome relief.

For the younger of spirit, even "Francis the Talking Horse" was believable as he helped his friends get out of - and into - trouble. Lipsync was surprisingly good, but on the other hand, maybe we didn't really care.

The real comedies were about humans and their foibles. Vaudevillesque, people slipped and fell down, ran into doorways and had things dropped on them without tiring themselves or us tiring of seeing them do it. One of the great favorites was "the Three Stooges" where Louie, Curly and Moe were a rolling fire of just plain silliness.



Fig 4 : Typical scene from the Three Stooges

The other classic comedy act of the time was the group "Abbott and Costello". Though the gags seemed perhaps repetitive, Bud and Lou were very versatile, at least as for as subject matter goes. They could make fun out of just about anything, from the farm to the Foreign Legion.



Fig 5 Typical comedies
Abbott and Costello

It was however not always the main movie attraction that got kids inside the Star Theatre but rather the "serial". This was a movie of sorts broken into 12 to 15 chapters of about 15-20 minutes that ran just before the main movie. The following is a description (unknown Internet source) of chapter one of "The Spy Smasher"

"Chapter one is perhaps the most exciting chapter in serial history. And what a cliffhanger! Spy Smasher, discovering the dreaded Mask's plans to flood the US with counterfeit money, invades his motley crew's hideout, the Acme cafe wine cellar. There, a stellar fist fight, courtesy of stuntman Dave Sharpe, breaks out. Spy Catcher, whether hanging from a light fixture to drop kick bad guys, or diving across tables and over sandbags to flatten baddies, does everything with eloquence—his moves are compact, almost shyly brief, his punches economical, graceful, never choppy. After Spy Catcher seemingly has the fight under control, one of the Mask's men, lets flames fly from a large fuel tank. The burning oil fills the underground tunnel, and Spy Smasher hops on an old railway handcar to keep ahead of a fire that rolls forward like a tidal wave. As he cranks the handcar, he looks down at a box of grenades, and the flames dance closer. He drives toward the camera and then we see only twisting flames and hear crackling wood. Chapter Two's resolution, surprisingly, doesn't rely on a cheat to solve the dilemma. Spy Smasher escapes the burning oil, by reaching for the grenades, tossing them behind him, and snuffing out the fire with the grenade explosion."

One of the most lasting audiovisual memories of any Gander kid's childhood is the famous phrase that ended every serial chapter ; " Come to this theatre next week to see the next exciting episode of...the SPYYYYY CAAATCHER!!"



Fig 6. The Spy Smasher being tortured by people who look rather Nazi!

What many enjoyed most though, much more than the movies or the serials, were the "Movietoon News" features. In the days before "TV", we listened to the radio but that was mostly local news, country songs and idle chitchat. But the Movietoon News brought us the whole world, perhaps a bit late but it was international reporting of everything newsworthy, with pictures to prove it. Another Gander learning experience!