

Monroe's First Theater Had Brief Run

As I have indexed the Monroe newspapers from 1880 through 1908, the first reference to a movie theater being located in Monroe was the advertisement [shown here] from the Monroe Evening Times of June 29, 1907. This ad for the Family Theater appeared only two days before the theater opened. On the day of the opening there was a want ad in the paper looking for a girl to sell tickets.

The day after the opening an article stated that "there was a large crowd in attendance and a splendid lot of moving pictures was shown." The entertainment had been somewhat marred by the repeated blowing out of fuses as the wiring was not heavy enough for the current required by the machine. The wiring was overhauled by the next evening when the pictures were enjoyed without further annoyance. Win Babler was engaged to do the singing for the illustrated songs.

A week later the proprietors "favored the operators at the central office of the Monroe Telephone company with complimentary tickets." The girls were faithful and painstaking in the discharge of their duties and well deserved the little gratuities that were bestowed by appreciative patrons of the company."

It was reported on November 11 that there were nearly a thousand children at the theater on Saturday to see Teddy Bear Pictures with admission free to all children. Three hundred were admitted at a time. The children went wild as they saw the old familiar bear story in its "new and novel treatment."

The theater was dark one week later for the first time since it had opened a few months earlier. It had been announced on Saturday evening and notice was posted in the window that the theater would be closed Sunday evenings during the armory revivals, which were to continue through the following Sunday. Members of the Ministers' association objected to the Sunday evening performances. There was no criticism of the programs at the theater as they were providing clean, wholesome entertainment.

However, members of the Ministerial association said that unless the theater and pool rooms were closed on Sundays, they planned to take legal steps and have warrants issued every Monday morning if necessary. It was later reported on November 26, that Rev. J. H. Berkey, on behalf of the Monroe Ministerial association, had a warrant issued on the charge of committing offenses against the Sunday law. The theater had been dark during the revivals, but opened again on Sunday evening after the revivals had ended. The authorities had not been interested by the ministers, so they decided to take matters in their own hands.

"I am adverse to the action taken by the Ministerial association in regard to the closing of the Family theater on Sunday evening," declared Rev. J. H. Palmer from the pulpit of the Universalist Church on Sunday, December 1. "What good will it do, how much will it improve the morality or religion of the city to close their places of amusement on Sunday evenings," he asked. "The strict adherence to rigid statutes is not the worship of God. It is spirit and not law that constitutes religion." He wanted it known that all of the ministers were not represented by the action of the association. He shared that residents of reputable reputation who had visited the theater told him that it had an advantageous, in fact, an educational influence. He could see no harm in going to a place like that on a Sunday evening if the entertainment is what it should be.

The hearing on the complaint set for December 4 was adjourned until Monday, December 16. Walter Peterson, manager of the theater, traveled to Monticello that week and made arrangements to give a moving picture entertainment at Figi's Hall there on Monday evenings starting on



This was the advertisement for Monroe's first theater that appeared in the Monroe Evening Times on June 29, 1907.

December 23 for an admission of 25 cents. He later arranged to give weekly entertainments at Broughton's opera house on Thursday evenings in Brodhead starting on December 26.

The jury in the first trial could not come to an agreement. District Attorney McGrath made a second effort to secure a conviction on Monday, January 13. That trial was adjourned until January 21 because J. L. Sherron, attorney for Walter Peterson, requested that Peterson be able to go to Racine because of the illness of a relative.

Peterson announced on February 18 that the Family theater would be closing one week later because he needed to take his sick nephew from Racine to his home in Denmark. Mr. Peterson expected to return after several months and open up elsewhere. Because of this, the complaint was dismissed upon his agreement that there would be no more Sunday evening performances.

Mr. Peterson announced that the high school would purchase his moving picture outfit to be used for educational purposes. There might also have been an occasional show given so the machine could pay for itself in a short time. Many high schools were equipped with a similar machine.

It was announced in the February 11 newspaper that Fred Liser was to move his saloon from the Dowling building on Jefferson street [17th Avenue] across the street to the Karlen block, where he leased the room vacated by the Family theater. The Karlen block was located at the east end of the north side of the square. Photographs of this building can be seen on pages 14 and 15 of the Monroe, Wisconsin Area Pictorial History.