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The Nickelodeon

The Nickel Madness; the Amazing Spread of a New Kind of Amusement Enterprise Which Is Making Fortunes for Its Projectors.

—Headlines in *Harper's Weekly*, 24 August 1907

It was a time before there were World Wars, but only just before. The Second International Peace Congress was held at The Hague in 1907, and the third one was scheduled for 1915. People were talking about Peace, Rights for Women, Prohibition, Labor Relations, Child Welfare, and Moving Pictures. What had appeared at first as the "moving-picture craze" was bigger than anyone had anticipated. The reactions were bewildered and confused. Many feared the worst: this was getting out of control. America was confronting for the first time the phenomenon known as mass communication. Newspapers and magazines were part of it too, but they did not share in the excitement and apprehension that surrounded the moving image.

All across the country the little store shows known as nickelodeons were doing a gold-rush business in the midst of the economic recession of 1907. In downtown entertainment districts the nickel shows congregated in the same blocks with the herd instincts of overdue city buses. The shows ran continuously from morning to evening. Enterprising young men who could scrape together a little cash to invest in a picture show were getting rich, opening one nickelodeon after another, establishing theater chains or rental exchanges. The warning about the proverbial goose that provided the golden eggs, frequently heard in those days, fitted the situation rather well.

Upper- and middle-class people did not frequent these shows, or if they did, they hoped not to be seen there. At least this was the situation reported a couple of years later. At the beginning of 1909, with change in the wind, a trade periodical editor remembered, "During the past three or four years . . . any person of refinement looked around to see if [he were] likely to be recognized by anyone before entering the doors."[1]

This does not mean that respectable people in 1907 could not see moving pictures if they wanted. For one thing, they could see them at the high-class vaudeville show, since few variety shows lacked a reel or two of moving pictures. They could see them in museums of curiosities, such as the Eden Musee in New York City, patronized by the "upper classes," or in the town halls, or in legitimate theaters between the acts of plays or as Sunday-evening "concerts." They could even see them in churches. In the country or the smallest towns, they had to wait for the touring show to book into the local opera house, or the grange hall, or YMCA, or await the arrival of the old-style black-tent show, which still followed the route of country fairs or circuses, showing

films inside its darkened canvas walls. By 1908 or 1909, only the very smallest towns lacked a moving-picture theater of some sort. Where the population was not big enough to support a permanent theater, an exhibitor would do a circuit of several towns, showing films one night a week in each. As one exhibitor wrote to the *Moving Picture World:* "I know a party who makes out well with a circuit of five small towns about the size [six to seven hundred people] you mention. He shows twice a week in the largest one and once a week in the others, does his own singing and entertaining and employs only one expert operator." In many towns, when the first permanent moving-picture show opened, even if it were a nickel house, all classes of people attended.[2]

For the millions of urban working-class people and new immigrants, going to the movies represented not only an affordable amusement but an extraordinary fascination. It is possible that motion pictures have never had such a devoted and enthusiastic audience since these early years. People went night after night, or from one show to another. Frank Howard, a prominent New England exchange man, defined a motion-picture fan as "one that attends one theatre every day, at least once a day, if not two or three times." In 1907 the nickel show was still usually only about half an hour, although competition was already pushing it to greater lengths in some areas. Usually, there was plenty of time to go from one to the next.[3]

Workers in Willimantic, Connecticut, a factory village "where hundreds sleep in cold and cheerless furnished rooms," found warmth and social life at the moving-picture show instead of the saloon. "Men not often seen in the company of their wives on the streets were now taking whole families to the motion pictures night after night," reported the *Willimantic Journal.* The reference to the saloon was no joke in those days of the "Wets" and the "Drys." The saloon provided a gathering place, a social life, and a political center for the blue-collar working man, the foreign-born, and the non-Protestant. It did not escape the attention of the Protestant upper-class reformers that the nickelodeons cut a significant amount of time from that spent in saloons. Nickelodeons were even credited or blamed, depending on the point of view, for putting some of the saloons out of business.[4]

The nickelodeon audience was neither monolithic nor immutable. Perceptions of this audience were mythic even in 1907, and it is difficult to get a precise picture of its constituents. Most discussions of it have centered around the little store show in the entertainment districts of the big cities. When Joseph Medill Patterson, known as "the young millionaire Socialist" in the golden years of American socialism, tells us in the often-cited *Saturday Evening Post* article of 1907 that a third of the spectators were children, we can give some credence to his claim because there are sufficient confirming accounts. Children continued to make up large portions of the audience despite all the efforts of reformers to keep them out and despite the legislation in many cities ruling that an adult must accompany each child. For example, in New York in May 1909 a visitor to the evening show at the Bronx Theater (at Wendover and Park Avenue in the Bronx), located in a working-class neighborhood, found the audience largely composed of children, plus a few adults and a uniformed officer whose job it was to keep order. The children saw Selig's RIP VAN WINKLE with Humanoscope (actors speaking lines from behind the screen) and other pictures, and a lady singing with song slides. At the end of 1910 in a Connecticut mill town, a survey of 350 schoolchildren ten to fourteen years old showed that all but 34 of them attended movies, 183 once a week, 130 twice a week, and 9 every day. Of those 9

daily filmgoers, 6 of them attended an average of 6 days a week, while 3 were there because they had jobs in nickelodeons. Of the 316 who attended the movies, 130 did so without adults, and only 20 went only in the afternoon. There were 75 children who attended on Sunday evenings.[5]

However, I have some doubts about Patterson's statement that "for some reason, young women from sixteen to thirty years old are rarely in evidence, but many middle-aged and old women are steady patrons, who never, when a new film is to be shown, miss the opening." In the afternoon, it might have been true that few young women were seen in the nickelodeons, for they were now flocking to the workplace, in nothing like the numbers of today, of course, but in large enough quantities to bring with them the winds of change. They worked not only in the mills and the factories and the sweatshops, but in the more refined atmosphere of offices, where they filled positions as telephone switchboard operators, typists, and telegraphists. In the new moving-picture industry itself there were to be many positions open to them. The New Woman was enjoying her newfound freedom, and that would have included dropping in at the cafes, dance halls, and nickelodeons after the day's work was done. To be sure, the more refined or conservative young ladies would not be found in such places, but there were a sufficient number of young women present to alarm the guardians of morality.[6]

Patterson continued:

> In cosmopolitan city districts the foreigners attend in larger proportion than the English speakers. This is doubtless because the foreigners, shut out as they are by their alien tongues from much of the life about them, can yet perfectly understand the pantomime of the moving pictures. As might be expected, the Latin races patronize the shows more consistently than Jews, Irish or Americans. Sailors of all races are devotees.

When Patterson speaks of sailors, this indicates that he probably visited nickelodeons catering to transient audiences. Yet if he had observed the nickelodeons on the Lower East Side of New York or Halstead Street in Chicago, he would have found a very high attendance by Jews. H. F. Hoffman reported that Pathé Frères' films were particularly popular in the Jewish ghetto of Chicago because they usually had few subtitles, which could not be read by this audience. The same was true, he said, in Polish and Slavic neighborhoods.[7]

A suburban exhibitor, who appears to have been a considerable snob, complained that the New York exchanges bought films only according to the demands of their best customers, the Lower East Side theaters. They demanded blood-and-thunder melodrama, while exhibitors in Stamford, Connecticut, or Rutherford, New Jersey, or even on 116th Street in Manhattan, could not get the films suitable for their more literate audiences. "The other night," he wrote, "I made an excursion to the vicinity of Essex and Rivington streets, in the very heart and thick of the tenement district." He admitted seeing one scenic film, in poor condition, in this nickelodeon:

> The audience also sat still for one or two high-class films without any fuss, although we are sure they didn't understand what they were looking at any more than they would a Chinese opera. . . . I would have been more comfortable on board a cattle train than where I sat. There were five

> hundred smells combined in one. One young lady fainted and had to be carried out of the theater. I can forgive that, all right, as people with sensitive noses should not go slumming. But what is hardest to swallow is that the tastes of this seething mass of human cattle are the tastes that have dominated, or at least set, the standard of American moving pictures (*Moving Picture World,* 23 September, 1910, p. 658).

However, another nickelodeon in the same neighborhood was described by another observer in a 1908 article entitled "Where They Play Shakespeare for Five Cents":

> The Herr Professor was telling the story of *Romeo and Juliet.* Standing beside the screen at one end of a long room, fitted up with its metallic ceiling and its rows upon rows of benches, he looked like a veritable Jewish Balzac. The Herr Professor is eager to make of his five-cent theater an educational center among the children and grown people of the lower East Side, and to judge by the manner in which the crowds are flocking through the gaily painted entrance, and by the overflow left standing on the sidewalk waiting for the next performance, there is no doubt that the Herr Professor is meeting with success. He is a graduate of two foreign universities, and has good ideas, no matter how much he may be limited by the business conditions of the moving picture world. The Herr Professor is a theater manager. Evening after evening he receives the tin rolls of films containing the melodrama or classical play that is to form the half-hour's amusement.
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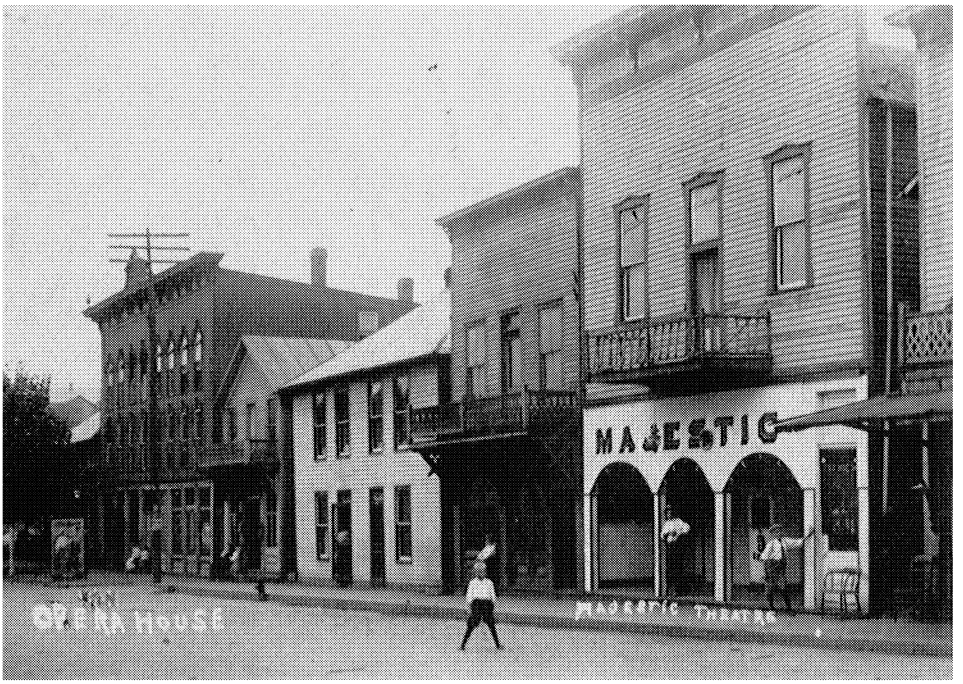
> Sometimes relying on his own voice, he will fill the hall with his stentorian tones. At other times, fagged out by the constant repetition of the story, he will resort to the megaphone. The audience that flocks to the Herr Professor's Theatre is an interesting mixture of foreigners of all classes. Girls drop in alone, a fact that speaks well for the moral condition of that quarter of town. Boys come in squads. A mother and father and their children count upon an evening's entertainment. But perhaps the most interesting part of this human spectacle is the audience of wan and curious little people who stand outside, unable to afford the luxury costing five cents (Montrose J. Moses, *Theater Magazine,* September 1908, p. 264).[8]

It would be impossible to count accurately the number of nickelodeons existing at any one time. They were constantly going out of business and springing up anew. Most of the available figures do not distinguish true nickel showplaces from every other place where motion pictures were exhibited. Even in the years when the Motion Picture Patents Company extracted a weekly two-dollar fee from each licensed exhibitor, it was difficult to keep track precisely, owing to the constant changes in status of the movie houses. *Variety*'s "conservative estimate" was 2,500 nickelodeons for the entire country at the beginning of 1907. In May 1907, the *Moving Picture World* said there were 2,500 to 3,000, and in November, the figure cited by Patterson was "between four and five thousand." By July 1908, an approximate figure of 8,000 was given by an Oakland, California, newspaper.[9]

The nickelodeon at Broadway and Division Street in Camden, New Jersey.

The opera house and the nickelodeon were only a few doors apart on Valley Street in Corning, Ohio, in 1908.



Does this reflect the real growth, or only the variance in estimates? The figures indicate a kind of peak about the end of 1908. Even though many store shows were to go out of business in the following year, there were as many new ones, according to figures supplied by the Motion Picture Patents Company in May 1909. The Patents Company claimed six thousand licensed theaters and two thousand independent, for a total of eight thousand in the United States. The roundness of the figures shows them to be approximate. It is also evident from this information that eight thousand moving-picture theaters included all the kinds of exhibition places, since the Patents Company would have issued licenses to any theater, nickelodeon or not, that wished to use its films. By 1910, the numbers were growing again: the Patents Company records show ten thousand theaters of all kinds in that year. At the same time the population of the United States was about ninety million, or a national average of nine thousand persons for each moving-picture show. By 1914, the figure given by Frank L. Dyer of the Patents Company was about fourteen thousand moving picture theaters in the United States. By this time, the nickelodeon era was over, despite the fact that many nickelodeons still existed.[10]

Perhaps we can get a better feel for these numbers and rates of growth by looking at some individual cities or towns. In Indianapolis, for example, there were twenty-one nickelodeons and three ten-cent theaters in 1908, only three years after the first nickelodeon had appeared there. Each nickelodeon in this city gave a show consisting of one reel of film, which might contain two or three different subjects, and an illustrated song, with the show taking twenty to twenty-five minutes—"except when there is a crowd waiting, then it is speeded up to 15 to 17 minutes." The shows in Indianapolis were open from nine in the morning till eleven at night, which allowed about twenty to thirty shows each day. If you could afford ten cents, you could go to one of the three high-class theaters and get an evening of three or four reels of pictures with live entertainment consisting of illustrated songs, vaudeville acts, and slide lectures lasting from one to one-and-a-half hours. By 1911, the number had increased to seventy-six motion-picture theaters alone, not including regular theaters that changed over to movies during the summer. However, only fifteen of the movie houses remained downtown in 1911, because of the high rents.[11]

In 1908 there were fifteen nickelodeons in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and the exchange that supplied most of them thought this was too many. To survive, they depended on spectators who attended day after day. In 1909 Philadelphia had about 184 "picture parlors," and on Girard Avenue there were five shows in four blocks, the patronage drawn mostly from "poor working class people." However, in September 1908 Sigmund Lubin had opened a high-class theater on Market Street in Philadelphia, which he modestly called "Lubin's Palace," "unquestionably the largest and most elaborate moving picture theater in the world," seating eight hundred spectators. In 1909, Rochester, New York, had seventeen shows for a population of 200,000.[12]

Chicago, probably the biggest moviegoing town of all in those days, had 407 picture houses in 1909 for a population of slightly over two million, or approximately one nickelodeon or theater for each 5,350 people. In New York City there was one for each 11,250 people. By October 1912, there were said to be 732 exhibitors in Chicago, 650 of them showing moving pictures exclusively. At the end of 1913, however, the Chicago License Bureau listed only 550 moving-picture theaters.[13]

The number supplied by the *Moving Picture World* for New York City in 1908 was 300 to 400, for a population of over 4.5 million people. Robert Allen found only 123 motion-picture exhibitions listed in *Trow's Business Directory* for Manhattan in the 1908 edition, exclusive of the vaudeville theaters. The large numbers of nickelodeons clustered in the borough of Brooklyn may account in part for the discrepancy, and the *World's* figures may have included all types of exhibition places. It is also very likely that some store shows never got listed in *Trow's*, as they were a very fly-by-night business in 1908. Coney Island saloons, with no show license, gave film shows for free and gained their profits from the sale of drinks.

City ordinances similar to those in New York governing the size of nickelodeons existed in many other cities, but somehow in New York they were more restrictive or took longer to change. Film historians have mistakenly understood the New York City limit of 299 seats as a regulation of the common show license under which nickelodeons operated (the trade press of the time made the same error), but in fact this was a condition of the building codes and fire laws. The March 1911 report of Raymond B. Fosdick to Mayor Gaynor made it clear: "Licenses for picture houses may be of two kinds, dependent not upon the seating capacity, but wholly upon the kind of performances." The ordinance was changed in 1913 to permit movie theaters to have 600 seats according to changes in the building codes.

New York remained far behind the rest of the country in building new and more expensive moving-picture theaters, as well as in upgrading other exhibition conditions. The dominant theatrical interests were a likely factor in holding back growth. The Motion Picture Patents Company said in May 1909 that there were then only half as many motion-picture theaters in New York as had existed the previous December. If these rather startling figures are accurate, it must have been the Patents Company itself that was responsible for cutting down its own potential market by threatened or actual litigation against the use of unlicensed projection machines. There were a lot of Patents Company replevin suits in the first months of 1909, whereby licensed films in unlicensed theaters were seized. By 1910, however, the *Moving Picture World* reported about six hundred picture shows in Greater New York.[14]

It seems no city can be taken as typical. New England was different from both the Midwest and New York. In every region and every major city there were slightly different situations that still have to be studied before we have a comprehensive picture of the nickelodeon era.

Russell Merritt's study of Boston nickelodeons and Robert Allen's research on Manhattan store shows, together with the contemporary accounts in periodicals, newspapers, and the trade press, reveal some of the variants in locations and trace the expansion. In large cities nickelodeons tended to group themselves at first in the already-established amusement districts, right next door to the high-class vaudeville and legitimate theaters in many cases, and expanded into higher-class residential areas and suburbs as time went on, moving away from the overcrowded tenement districts that at first provided the largest source of customers.[15]

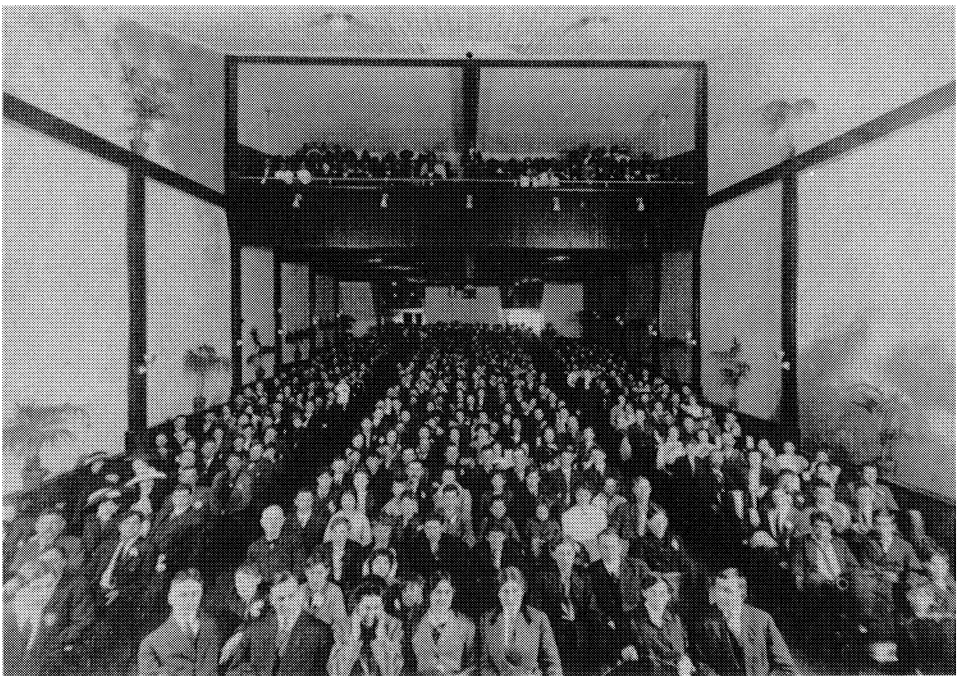
The Boston situation studied by Russell Merritt differed in several ways from that found in other major cities. Boston was then still considered the cultural capital of the country and tended to look down its patrician nose at common amusements. The census figures of 1910 show almost three-quarters of a million people, yet in that year Boston had just twenty moving-picture theaters, or one for approximately each 33,500

persons, compared to New York's 11,250 and Chicago's 5,350. Nor were these nickelodeons in the sense of the admission price, as almost all of them charged ten cents from the day of their opening. Russell Merritt concludes that "nickelodeons were seldom a nickel," but in fact, elsewhere in the country they almost always were, until the little store show finally vanished in the mists of time. Intense competition held the admission at a nickel even though the length of the show kept increasing, including more films and more vaudeville acts. When theaters were built with greater seating capacity, they often retained the five-cent admission because they could give fewer shows during a day but still make the same income at the box office. This situation eventually contributed to driving the small theaters, dependent on rapid turnover, out of business. Regular vaudeville theaters charged much more than the nickelodeons, and moving-picture exhibitors tried to increase admission prices when they increased the number of films and vaudeville acts in their programs. But it was not easy to do that if the local competition offered the same for five cents. In Denver, for example, known as "the Nickel City of the West," exhibitors were still trying to raise prices with only partial success at the end of 1914. Small theaters in the mountain district of Tennessee, open only one or two nights a week and still charging five cents in 1915, were being forced to close because they could not pay the war tax when it was increased from $25 to $50 a year.[16]

Lary May, in his study of social changes reflected in the movies, *Screening Out the Past*, begins by remembering Henry Seidel Canby's *The Age of Confidence*, in which Canby "saw one apt symbol for that change in his home town, the center of local society, the opera house, had been turned into a movie theater open to all."[17] The idea of movies as a potent device for the democratization of American society was extremely popular with social theorists: in their view, the movies were going to teach the foreign-born to adopt the values of the established social system of native-born white Protestant culture. That meant order, discipline, hard work, responsibility for others, and strict sexual control. It meant preserving the family.

There was some selection, before 1909, of high-class films for the shows catering to the middle-class and the refined: scenic films and educational films sprinkled judiciously with comedies and the classics of literature. As Charles Musser has discovered, the lecture tours of Lyman Howe and Burton Holmes were approved, and in the case of Howe even supported, by church people who considered amusements frivolous or immoral, because these kinds of shows were deemed educational. In fact, the same films were being shown in both kinds of exhibition places, with the most vulgar subjects omitted in the higher-class halls and a reduced amount of educational films selected for the nickelodeons. The propriety of moving-picture shows had more to do with exhibition venues and methods than the moral quality of the films being shown. The reformers and uplifters tried to increase the educational value of films in the nickelodeon after 1908, but as we will see in chapter 3, audiences often rejected such films.[18]

The trend was for these two exhibition systems, serving the high-class theaters and the nickelodeon, to come closer together. Within a few years just about everybody outside the large cities was going to the same theaters, seeing the same films, and sharing in the communal experience: people of all classes, and the whole family. As Canby had observed, the opera house was once the place for high society, the well-to-do, and the upward-striving middle class. Now, the opera house was turned into a movie theater and the whole town attended. To be sure, they did not always



Opening night at the Rex Theater, Hannibal, Missouri, 4 April 1912. The balcony was reserved for blacks.

mix in the same sections within the theater (wherever moving picture theaters were large enough to have "sections"). A variety of admission prices ensured a separation of classes, as in the legitimate theaters. The division of audiences into separate theaters may have lasted longer in cities, where the little neighborhood theater and the movie palace downtown charged different admission prices.

The "democratization of America" was not all that easy. In many parts of the country, blacks had to sit up in the balcony. A brave "colored woman" who refused to sit in the balcony of the Victoria Theater in Rochester, New York, in 1913 lost her suit to defend her civil rights. It should be noted that "Italians and the rougher element" were also expected to sit in the balcony in that theater. "In the South the colored brother is given to understand that he must flock by himself or there will be trouble, but in the North the case is different and every now and then there seems to be an organized effort on the part of the negroes to make as much trouble as possible." The *Moving Picture World* editor who reported this reminisced about his own experiences:

> In Washington a number of years ago we broke into the theatrical business as usher in the balcony of one of the theaters. There they had a Section D for the colored patrons, and the box office man sold D to all colored applicants, but now and then a negro would hire a white boy to buy his tickets for him and turn up with seats in the white sections. In such a case the usher was instructed to drop the tickets on the floor and use a couple of D tickets with which he was provided. It was not strictly

> honest, perhaps, but it met guile with guile, and something of that sort was necessary in a low-price house (*Moving Picture World*, 4 October 1913, p. 147).

Despite the efforts of Progressives, some of them former Abolitionists, working to integrate the former slaves and their offspring into American society, and some black Americans struggling for equality, the unconscious, easy acceptance of prejudice and its stereotypes by the majority of Americans can be seen in hundreds of films throughout the whole period of silent film, including the most famous example, THE BIRTH OF A NATION, in 1915.

There were certainly some communities where the races mixed freely. There were also theaters wholly owned by blacks and catering to the black clientele, 214 of them in America in 1913, according to the head of the black-owned and -operated Foster Photoplay Company of Chicago, William Foster.[19]

By 1907, there were enough of the cheapest, shabbiest kind of nickelodeon to alarm the responsible citizens and social reformers. They knew something unusual was going on, even if they didn't know they were confronting a small social revolution. Many of the inner-city nickelodeons, such as those on "Motion Picture Row" on East Fourteenth Street in New York City and on Halstead Street in Chicago, were undeniably dark and smelly and crowded and noisy. The audiences were loud and enthusiastic. The Jewish and Catholic immigrants from eastern and southern Europe showed less restraint in their emotions than the native-born white Protestants, and they jabbered in languages that were strange to Anglo-Saxons. There was the odor of poverty and the unwashed, to which was added, on damp days, the smell of wet wool. The "hawker" called out to the passersby, mechanical music blared out, and the manager-owner would lounge around the entrance, counting his nickels, watching the competition next door or across the street. The moving pictures would run from two to ten minutes each, and there would be several films on the program. If there were a crowd out front waiting to spend its nickels, the manager might decide to shorten the program, either by speeding up the cranking of the projector or by dropping a film from the program.

According to the alarmists, pimps and white slavers waited outside the nickelodeons to offer to pay the way in for young women: perhaps this did happen sometime, somewhere, but it is difficult to separate the hysteria of the yellow press from the self-protecting statements of the moving-picture trade. The fear is symptomatic of the changing lifestyles of young women, no longer totally under the control of the Victorian family structure. Films about white slavery enjoyed a vogue, in the name of reform, but their exploitative nature was soon recognized, and in the end they added to the pressure for censorship.

In fact, the darkness inside and the enthusiasm of the unwashed poor who made up the patronage was something unknown and fearful to those outside. However, the high-minded idealists of the time saw instead the potential for uplifting the masses in these stygian holes. The unsightly conditions existed chiefly in the slum areas. Even in 1907, some of the store shows, in other parts of the city, and especially in small towns, were entirely respectable.

Who were the people running the profitable nickelodeon business? Nickelodeon owners and managers came primarily from the same kind of background as the majority of the spectators; the blue-collar workers, the immigrants, large numbers of them Jew-

The Princess Theater in St. Cloud, Minnesota. The Italian spectacle film, THE FALL OF TROY *(*CADUTO DEL TROIA*) was released in the United States in 1911.*