

OLD MOVIES-I

When Up to 12 Theaters Once packed in 'Point Flick Fans

By Mark Walker

Marketing Analyst & Puppeteer

Right after high school I started attending motion picture houses more frequently and collecting movie memorabilia. I stumbled upon one of Fell's Point's unique treasures, The Cinema: Poster and Collector Shop, at 428 S. Wolfe Street. Robert T. Marhenke was the proprietor and his emporium resembled a thrift shop gone to the movies: posters, publicity photos, lobby cards, and reels of 35mm. "coming attractions." Customers looked through piles on kitchen tables and if anything caught their fancy, they negotiated with Mr. Marhenke.

You could purchase almost any movie poster or lobby card for a few dollars. I wish I had kept some, for today they're worth thousands. Even though Marhenke was semi-retired when I met him, the balding cinema buff was supplying movies and other advertising accessories to smaller theaters that needed a last-minute motion picture.

In his younger days Marhenke managed several local movie houses, distributed films, and handled occasional requests for novelty acts. One such was Dantini the Magnificent, a magician who lived near the shop and was an amateur film maker. It was at the shop that I met the Polish conjuror—a fit subject for another story.

In 1974, Marhenke's customers were raving about Robert K. Headley Jr.'s book, EXIT. Headley was a government linguist and he began researching the history of movie theaters in Baltimore when the old Stanley was torn down. Recently I dusted off my \$10 first edition, now worth about \$400, and contacted the author. Mr. Headley has graciously allowed The Fell's Pointer to utilize his publication in this series on the neighborhood's one-time movie theaters.

Between 1909 and 1911, movies had achieved such a success that over 80 theaters opened in Baltimore—with up to 12 of them in Fell's Point at various times, almost all on Broadway. Traces remain:

The PARADISE, at 1727 Fleet Street, was among the first three movie theaters in Baltimore. It opened in 1905 on the first floor of a three-story building, seating 125. Two or three short films were shown in the evening, and during intermission glass slides of the Passion Play or scenes from the Great Baltimore Fire of 1904 filled the screen. At times, there were vaudeville acts. To attract customers, the theater gave away china and lollipops. It operated until about 1912.

The building remains in much the same condition as then, but it has a lot more history now. As Hi's Variety, it sells just about everything except movie memorabilia. The Wrocinski brothers dispense the street's history with each sale. On the wall is a photo of the Paradise.

The only local theater still offering films, the APEX at 110 S. Broadway, has been notorious for decades with its "adult" fare. But it opened as a legitimate movie in 1942, seating 672. On a night in 1955, its audience of one was decidedly juvenile. A policeman saw a crying boy locked inside the lobby. It was almost midnight before the officer located the manager and rescued the 10-year-old.

In a preview of coming attractions, I can tell you that next month I will tell of yet more movie houses that lined



Photo by Mark Walker

In 1970s, movies meant a poster business on Wolfe Street.



Photo by Lew Diuguid

The ex-Cluster movie house lives on in an evangelical second calling.

up Fell's Pointers. But for now, the tale of one that should have top billing—as it qualifies for the 'Pointer's concurrent series on the once and current Churches of Broadway:

The Churches of Broadway—IV This Iglesia Once Was Cluster Movie Hall

For all the clear religious intent of the *Iglesia Pentecostal de Evangelizacion Misionera Inc.*, the church at 303 S. Broadway radiates its past as a movie theater. When the marquee was ablaze with lights, they spelled THE CLUSTER—named after Benjamin Cluster, one of the pioneers in Baltimore's movie business. The original Cluster was built about 1909 and torn down in 1921.

The present building opened in 1923, with 900 seats and one of the earliest air-conditioning systems in the city.

In the late 1920s the Cluster acquired a \$15,000 Vitaphone sound system so that it could show talkies and was the second theater in town to book "The Jazz Singer" for capacity crowds. By the 1970s, the fare frequently was horror films, and I was one of the theater's semi-steady customers.

The Missionary Evangelical Pentecostal Church Inc., to translate from the Spanish, is perhaps Broadway's first Latino congregation. A painted sign, too modest to qualify as a marquee, proclaims Daniel Santos as pastor. Efforts to reach him have failed but a seller of religious materials next door assures that services continue. As it happened, one of the patriarchs of the church, Isaac Tirado, 88, of Puerto Rico but long a resident of Wolfe St., died early this month and drew a large crowd at the funeral home on Wolfe and Eastern Ave. The procession of autos took up two blocks.

Happenings

Tempest in a Coffee Pot—The Daily Grind, accustomed to passively accommodating the passionate causes of 'Point regulars thrashing out the future of this community over high-Keyed coffee, became the focus of a set-to itself. The house sought permission to provide clanking cups at tables out back—within earshot of residential Lancaster Street—while city inspectors told the Thames Street favorite to fold up its sidewalk tables. Lancaster Streeters had security as well as noise issues, and feared a precedent for bars backing up to them. Recriminations provoked petitions. Even the dogs objected. A Sun article spiced the brew. There was talk of the Grind and its tattooed staff packing off to An'arunel. The owner then appeared at the Homeowners' Association meeting, acknowledged that the two outside issues involved separate tables, so to speak, and garnered civic support for the city to permit those on Thames. The out-back issue would be addressed in meetings with the neighbors.

Urban Barking Ever a Bother—We have received letters about a few dog owners in the neighborhood. Most are responsible and considerate, but we've been asked to post this friendly reminder: If your dog barks at every passing person, and there are a lot of them since we live in the city, it is much appreciated if you can bring the dog in or stop it from disturbing the community. Also, it is very important to clean up after your dogs when you take them for a walk. If you are having problems with dogs, the city's 311 call center can direct you to animal control.

Soaring Eagles Pow-Wow at Burns—The Baltimore American Indian Center invites all to the Soaring Eagles dance group's third annual pow-wow, May 20-21 at the Du Burns Center, Ellwood Ave. and Boston St. The Friday pow is 10AM-3PM and is educational; the Saturday wow is competition dancing, until 5. Native food and goods. Adults \$5, children under 12 \$3 and under 3 free. 410.675.3535

Bill Bauer of Shakespeare St. Dies—William Bauer was large man with a sizable sense of humor who walked a small, flea-bit dog named for Bo Derrick. He died in his early 80s of cancer. His neighbors along Shakespeare St. and others far flung lament his loss.



Artist Cavacos takes up Crabs

A design by artist Maria Cavacos of Portugal St., who also is cartoonist for The Fell's Pointer, was selected to become one of 200 6-by-6-foot fiberglass crabs that will skitter around Baltimore this summer—even as did funky fish three years ago. She painted the crab called "Our City," sponsored by Constellation Energy, in the window of Southern Saw Co. at 1918 Eastern Ave. and soon received a second commission, still in the works, from The Shelter Group. It is called "Filling the City" (see photo).

The designs are posted at City Hall and on www.crabtown.org. Companies and individuals can purchase a crab design for about \$7,000. After a summer in the streets, the crabs will be auctioned, with proceeds going to city schools.



Photo by Lew Diuguid
Maria Cavacos paints crustaceans in a store window

Plans for St. Stans Include Expanded Ex-Church, 23 Town Houses

At last month's meeting of the Fell's Point Task Force, leaders of a dozen community groups learned of plans for development projects at two prominent sites: the St. Stanislaus Koska Church complex at Ann and Aliceanna Sts., and parking lot and ex-police boys' club at Bank St. and Broadway. The meeting also focused on docking of the Black-Eyed Susan paddle wheeler and the larger issue of updating pier policy.

Under plans submitted by board members of the Mother Seton Academy on the St. Stans site, the steeped church that served a Polish congregation here for more than 100 years would be modified to become an expanded school house. The current academy structure as well as the corner rectory and buildings along Aliceanna, including an auditorium building, would be razed to make room for 23 four-story town houses.

The site has been a focus of concern ever since the diminished ethnic congregation was merged into another in Canton several years ago. Two factions vied to maintain the historic church as a museum but neither met the sale terms of the Franciscan Order that owns it. The sale was closely watched because the property is part of an exclusion from the height restrictions that generally apply under the Fell's Point Urban Renewal Ordinance.

Commentators expressed relief that no high buildings were involved but asked whether at least the facades if not the full buildings along Aliceanna, as well as the

academy, could be readapted. The STV development team said this was found impractical but would be reconsidered—as would a suggestion to improve the church's revisionist steeple.

The Broadway site offered by the city drew two proposals, both welcomed by the Upper Fell's Point Improvement Association as a solution to an idle eyesore along the avenue. Both developers would rehabilitate the ex-boys' club building and fill the lot with condos plus retail. MetroScape would include 14 price-controlled condos for area elderly, facing on an inner courtyard, in its total of 34 units. Consolidated Investment and Management Group foresees ground-level retail and parking along with 19 condos priced at up to \$500,000. The Improvement Association has sought investment, particularly in new housing, on the west side of Broadway—largely bypassed by the real estate boom elsewhere.

Bob Keith, ex-boat owner and the Task Force's transportation specialist, brought up the issue of the city apparently having agreed to allow the Black-Eyed Susan tour boat to dock on the pier at the foot of Broadway. While the Task Force had provided the owner of the paddle-wheeler a letter of support two years ago, this seems to have resulted in part from confusion about whether the dockage would be on, or only near, the historic pier. Further, the boat subsequently has been substantially enlarged.

Why Real Estate Renaissance Leaves Gaping Holes Along Broadway

By Jack Trautwein, P.J.

Former and potential storeowner

Once upon a time, Fell's Point was a retail center for east Baltimore and, believe it or not, Locust Point. Until about 1940, a ferry connecting the two Points brought over those customers. Shoppers would buy not only groceries at the market but anything from a hat pin to a new car in this thriving community. "Mom and pop" stores flourished.

Recently, with the closing of CopyCat, Lakein's Jewelry, Shockets, and Funky Fish, and with the vast number of other vacant stores along Broadway, one must ask: What's happened? In this, Fell's Point is a microcosm of the American retail scene. We consumers have decided bigger is better, and convenience is even better. Therefore the dollars are spent at the low-price Wal-Marts, Home Depots—or on the Internet, Office Depots and Safeways, which dominate the "bread and butter" merchandize. Mom and pops are left to sell the occasional item or cater to the fickle tourist trade. Internet sales also take a toll.

With high rents, the loss of bread and butter sales and

the hassles of parking, the remaining shops seem to stand little chance. Even though many do not wish to see variety of goods and personalized attention retreat into history, we continue to drive off to buy elsewhere.

There may be hope, though, in a niche for high-end and exclusive merchandize that a small independent store can offer by using the internet creatively. This could mean a co-op website catalog as well as a centralized processing center. Such businesses' start-up costs may be out of reach for potential store owners, though. This calls for creative efforts by the community, The Fell's Point Development Corp. and the city government.

Another answer would be to turn the vacant stores into museums—representing bygone or endangered retail categories. They probably could bring in more money than many shop owners earn today. This way we would fulfill the desire to have the store fronts occupied and go on traveling to Wal-Marts. Who said you can't have your cake and eat it, too?

Is the community willing to be creative or do we leave our children with "Once upon a time?"

Schedules

Trash

Place trash outside in cans or, after 6AM on collection day, in plastic bags. Mondays and Thursdays but no holidays.

Recycling

Place outside by 7AM on collection day. Glass, metal and plastic in blue plastic bags. Mondays, May; 11, 25.

Paper and cardboard in paper bags, cardboard boxes or tied with string. Fridays, May 8, 22.

Neighborhood Meetings

Douglass Place: Third Wednesday of every other month at the Polish National Alliance, 1637 Eastern Avenue, 410.563.297.

Fell's Point Antique Dealers' Association: Call 410.675.4776.

Fell's Point Community Organization: Second Mondays, 7PM, Fell's Point Visitor Center, 410.276.5471.

Fell's Point Development Corp.: 9AM every Tuesday, Max's on Broadway. Open to all. 410.675.8900.

Fell's Point Homeowners' Association: First Wednesdays, 7PM, Bertha's 2nd Floor.

Greenspace Action Partnership: Second Tuesdays, 5:30PM, Visitor Center, 410.675.6750 ext 10.

Society for the Preservation of Fell's Point and Federal Hill: Call 410.675.6750.

The Fell's Pointer is published monthly by volunteers of Fell's Point Citizens on Patrol, Inc. Questions, input and participation in patrols and this newsletter are welcome.

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