

A big attraction in a little town

Cinema offers new movies at old prices

By Mindy Schneeberger
The Pendulum

In the heart of Graham, there's a place you can watch movies for just \$1.50. It has an incredible Dolby sound system and an old-fashioned balcony. Get there on time and you can see a cartoon before the feature. The popcorn's cheap, too.

The place is the Cinema Theatre. And its owner is as interesting as the moviehouse.

Tim Matthews has been the owner-manager of the Cinema Theatre for the past five years. In that time, he's turned the place around.

Matthews has been in the theater business since 1969, when he began running projectors in Raleigh. At that time, projectionists were getting paid a pretty penny -- up to \$7 an hour -- because of union deals. (Since then, however, the unions dissolved as the industry gave way to automation.)

Matthews was a school teacher by day, but he took to working as a projectionist in the evenings to supplement his income.

Hobby is cinema

Matthews eventually quit teaching school and moved to Graham. His wife, Betty, had inherited a farm, and he started what he calls a "tree business." For 12 years, Matthews has been running Ace Tree Service as his primary source of income. But his hobby has always been cinema.

A few years ago, Matthews agreed to help the Cinema Theatre make a comeback. The theater had been a "first run" establishment, meaning it charged full price for new movies. At that time, it cost \$3.75 to see a show. Concession

prices were high, too; and, according to Matthews, business was slow. The theater "went out of business because there was no business to be had," he says.

Matthews entered the picture when the previous owner hired him to come in once a week to keep the projection booth in order.

Secret to theater's success

One evening Matthews stumbled upon the secret to success: he couldn't find a movie to show so he got a copy of "ET" -- which had already been in other theaters for a while -- and charged just \$1 per seat. He sold 2,000 tickets in a week.

At first, Matthews was hesitant to buy the theater; so he leased it, asserting that if he turned a profit by December of that year, he would buy the building.

He made repairs to the theater, recovering the seats by himself, hiring people to clean the facilities and building a steady stream of customers. At that time, he charged \$1 per seat and only 50 cents for popcorn and drinks.

By December, he had turned a profit. He bought the equipment and later bought the building. The only things in the Cinema Theatre that Matthews doesn't own are a Love Analyzer machine, a Kiss-o-Meter, and a blood pressure monitor. He leases those.

Theater built in 1928

The theater itself has been around since 1928 and has changed hands many times in the past 61 years. Matthews says the building has never been closed for any length of time, although it was shut down for one week when he was taking over and needed to complete some paperwork.

In the 1930s, Graham -- yes, little Graham -- had two moviehouses. Matthews says every little town had theaters because there was no television in those years. And theaters flourished -- they often opened as early as 10 a.m. and ran throughout the day.



Photo by Rob Whiteside

The Cinema Theatre has occupied this site in Graham since 1928.

Over the years, moviehouses have changed quite a bit, but Matthews tries to recapture some of his favorite aspects of cinema at his theater. "I love cartoons, and when I was a kid that was one thing I looked forward to," he says.

Cartoons are regular feature

As the new manager, he bought a collection of cartoons and a 16-millimeter projector. Because special equipment is needed to show cartoons, most theaters no longer add the animated shorts before features.

Matthews has had a good response to the cartoons he shows, and he says the movie studios -- with the exception of Walt Disney -- don't care which shorts he runs. Disney Studios has requested that Matthews show its cartoons only before movies produced by one of its affiliates, Walt Disney, Touchstone or Buena Vista.

Many of Matthews' cartoons date from the 1930s and '40s and were shown in drive-in theaters before they made their debuts at the Cinema. Consequently, many of the shorts are worn out.

Worn-out film is one of the hazards of managing a "sub-run" moviehouse. Many theaters treat films badly; by the time those movies are passed to Matthews, the film may have been damaged by poor handling or misuse of equipment.



Photo by Rob Whiteside

Tim Matthews, owner of the theater.

Will not run worn prints

"I hate a sorry print," he says, "and I will not run a movie before I run a sorry print." In his efforts to provide the best picture, Matthews has driven to Smithfield to pick up a decent copy of "Top Gun" and all the way to Southern Pines to bring back an undamaged print of "Broadcast News" to Graham.

"I'm real fanatical about my picture," he says. The owner-manager has gone so far as to invest in a \$15,000-\$16,000 screen. He also rebuilt the projectors so they would produce steadier pictures.

With his background as a

projectionist, Matthews has been able to fix most equipment problems himself, thus saving thousands of dollars in repair costs.

Some of his repairs are stories in themselves: he took the motor out of his son's toy dump truck and attached it to the theater's amplifier. Now he can control the facility's sound from downstairs rather than in the projection booth. A practical solution to a typical problem. "It works," Matthews says.

Wants a family theater

The fact that Matthews' theater is a family operation also cuts down on costs. It also sets a

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