Conservative ministers and small-town social critics in the mid-Atlantic states sought the passage of blue laws and the enforcement of colonial-era statutes to keep movie theaters and other commercial amusements closed on the Sabbath. Film exhibitors, however, rated Sunday one of their most profitable business days; they continually fought to stay open, incurring fines and even jail sentences. This contest between religious groups and film exhibitors for the allegiance of small-town movie audiences, which was played out in communities in the southern, midwestern, and mid-Atlantic regions, will be further explored herein.[39]

In looking across the country at the situation of some seven thousand nickelodeons outside the big cities and at their nonurban audiences, we see that while most people had access to the movies some groups had relatively more opportunities to attend them—the men and boys of some ethnic groups and the small-town folk of the midwestern, New England, and mid-Atlantic regions. Other groups had relatively less exposure to movies, such as southern blacks, ethnic women and girls, evangelical Christians and other conservative religious society members, and most farm families of the South and West. Outside the South, small-town whites who did not belong to the most conservative religious sects had as much access to the movies as did city folk. And although urban commentators of the day maintained that the movie show's chief appeal was to women and children, we have seen that outside the largest urban areas, women and girls could face more hurdles of social custom and economic restraint to entering movie theaters than did their male kin. While there were very few people who had never seen motion pictures, there was much variety among people of different regions in how large a role movie shows played in their social lives.

from Kathryn H Fuller, At the Picture Show: Small Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture (1996)

3

"Let's Go in to a Picture Show"

The Nickelodeon

The nickelodeon era has been described as a brief but intense period of business boom, gaudy showmanship, and tumultuous change in film exhibition, wedged between film's beginnings and the rise of the star system, Hollywood, and picture palaces. Stretching the nickelodeon era to its limits would introduce it in 1904 or 1905 with the opening of the earliest stationary urban motion picture theaters. The period's closing is a matter of debate. It might be said to end in 1915 with the release of *The Birth of a Nation* and other spectacular American-made feature films; or in 1914 with the opening of the magnificent Strand Theater in New York City, one of the first true picture palaces; or, further back, in 1912 with the rise to prominence of small-time vaudeville theaters, the hybrid of movie and variety shows. Some have suggested the end of the nickelodeon theater era began almost at the start, with the opening of William Fox's elaborate, upscale Dewey Theater on Union Square in Manhattan in 1908.

From an urban film-exhibition perspective, the nickelodeon era appears momentary. But outside the big cities, many aspects of the era had longer duration. The buildings in which nickelodeon shows were held—opera houses, town halls, converted stores—were in service much longer

as community movie theaters in small towns than in the cities. The small-town theaters, exhibitors, audiences, programs, and the entire spirit of the operation retained what might be called a nickelodeon flavor throughout the silent film era.

In 1908, an estimated eight thousand nickelodeon theaters showed motion pictures across the United States. By 1910, that number had mushroomed to ten thousand, with a full seven thousand nickelodeons operating outside the big cities on small-town Main Streets, at country crossroads, at lakeside amusement parks, and at summer beach resorts. Nickelodeons could be started in anything from remodeled stores; older existing opera houses and town halls; spaces cordoned off by curtains or temporary walls in hotels, candy shops, or barrooms; newly built theater structures; and even rehabilitated livery stables. No matter what the structure's origins, to early film audiences across the country, the nickelodeon theater building materially symbolized the excitement, novelty, and mystery of the movie show. All parts of its outer shell were put to use in attracting viewers, from its evocative name written over the entrance to the blinking, glowing lights on the theater's façade and the other colorful exterior decorations. The continuous jangle of its automatic pianos, phonographs, and barkers attracted the notice of passersby. Patrons perused the nickelodeon's melodramatic, vibrant lithographed posters and other advertising materials filling theater lobbies and strewn along the sidewalk in sandwich-board displays.

The nickelodeon movie show was composed of a variety of narrative films of one and two reels in length with melodramatic or comic themes; other film subjects, in the tradition of the earlier itinerant shows, featured travel scenes and visual tricks. The film exhibition was still interspersed with live entertainment such as illustrated songs or a vaudeville act or two. A pianist or a two- or three-member musical ensemble provided simple accompaniment to the movies and performers. At times, exhibitors incorporated into their programs elaborate sound effects; "talkers" creating dialogue behind the screen; hand-colored or tinted films; programs with holiday, local, or other special themes; and a variety of hometown entertainers.

By 1915 in many big cities and smaller cities and towns, the standard movie show evolved into a program centered on a "feature" film of three reels or more in length that "starred" advertised actors. A new generation of urban theaters being built to replace the nickelodeons was larger, seating five hundred to fifteen hundred patrons and having more elegant

interior decorations, a corps of ushers, a larger orchestra, and admission prices three to ten times the nickelodeon's price of admission.[1]

In all parts of the country, nickelodeon theaters—urban, small town, and rural—had some obvious differences of decoration and operation, but they shared even more similarities. Some nickelodeons were sparsely adorned, but others had façades garnished with an excess of plaster ornamentation and poster advertising. Some exhibitors eked out a living operating a nickelodeon while working in other businesses, whereas others raked in fortunes due to bonanza locations. Although some distinctions in theater operation and ornamentation manifested themselves in accordance with individual exhibitors' business skills and the communities' tastes, the nickelodeon form could accommodate the majority of these differences.

Spurred by the get-rich-quick hopes of prospective exhibitors and the ease of entry into the field, the proliferation of nickelodeon theaters across the nation was swift. Thomas Tally boasted of starting the boom with his Electric Theater, which opened in Los Angeles in 1902. Hale's Tours (train cars outfitted as small theaters in which "passengers" viewed travel films) were a briefly profitable novelty originating in Kansas City and at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. John Harris and Harry Davis claimed credit for originating the term *nickelodeon* with their Nickelodeon Theater, which did fabulous business in Pittsburgh starting in 1905. The huge profits earned by the so-called first urban nickelodeon exhibitors were widely reported, and perhaps were exaggerated.[2]

Between 1907 and 1910, astonished observers counted more than 100 nickelodeons each in St. Louis, San Francisco, and Chicago. Manhattan alone had at least 300, and there were more than 450 in the combined boroughs. Since they were all independent, "mom and pop" operations, no one knew exactly how many existed. Barriers to entering the film exhibition field were low. Novices quickly had a wealth of advice literature to consult, from published guidebooks for prospective nickelodeon owners and how-to manuals on projector operation to the recommendations of suppliers of projectors, seats, screens, and decorative pressed-tin theater façades, all of which could be found in the exhibitors' trade press. By the late 1910s, when movie theater censuses became more precise, nearly 20,000 places were showing motion pictures at least one night a week. The quick and thorough blanketing of urban and small-town America with nickelodeons made movies a shared and almost inescapable part of popular culture.[3]

Despite the many similarities of their nickelodeon operations, urban and small-town exhibitors catered to their audiences' interests in significantly different ways. The tumultuous changes rocking the film industry in the mid-1910s did not impact big-city and small-town nickelodeons at the same time or in equal measure, and greater differences between urban and small-town moviegoing experiences began to appear. During the nickelodeon era, these differences were contained within the broad boundaries of the nickelodeon movie show. Big-city and small-town moviegoing experiences in this formative era were separate but linked, and in many ways were equal. After the nickelodeon period this would increasingly not be so.

Although New York City's nickelodeons, which drew the bulk of positive and negative publicity, were located mainly in the Upper and Lower East Side's tenement districts, this was not a common pattern elsewhere. As Russell Merritt has noted, in other cities and towns "they customarily opened in business districts on the outer edge of the slums, fringing white collar shopping centers, accessible to blue-collar audiences but even closer to middle class trade." Nickelodeon theaters were squeezed tightly into rented store space among shops, grocery stores, offices, apartment buildings, barrooms, garages, and the police and fire stations of Main Streets. Urban nickelodeon theaters largely depended on transients—shoppers, downtown workers, and other passersby—for patronage, whereas small-town theaters needed to attract the attention of a large portion of the community. Both types of exhibitors decorated their theaters primarily to draw customers in from the street, luring them with as many eye-catching exterior and interior decorations and ballyhoo as their needs demanded and budgets and imaginations allowed. The names of nickelodeon theaters illustrated brash showmanship, an appeal to respectability, and the mix of old and new entertainment forms still found in the small-town shows.[4]

Nickelodeon Nomenclature

From the days of the earliest itinerant moving picture company performances, exhibitors deliberated on what they should call this new form of entertainment, which incorporated elements of the lyceum, vaudeville, penny arcade, dime museum, and tent show. When traveling shows became stationary, promoting motion pictures as a novelty would no longer

suffice. Exhibitors thought that having a unique name for the product and its site of exhibition would pique public interest, evoke the excitement of the moviegoing experience, and bolster the conservative middle-class patrons' confidence in the good character of the show. Monikers bestowed on the earliest urban motion picture theaters by social critics and the amusement-seeking public—"nickel dumps" and "cheap shows"—were considered highly uncomplimentary by those film exhibitors who possessed pretensions toward legitimacy in the entertainment field. *Cinematograph,* the French term for a motion picture and a movie theater, seemed too cumbersome to most Americans, although another word adapted from the French that did satisfy many exhibitors was *nickelodeon.* It combined the Greek word for theater, *odeon,* which had been in wide use in Europe, with the name of the coin that was the price of admission. The "five-cent theater" sounded somewhat more refined when called the "nickelodeon," or at least so exhibitors hoped.[5]

Searching for an even more refined show-place name than *nickelodeon,* the Essanay Film Manufacturing Company of Chicago in 1910 sponsored a contest for exhibitors. They sought "a term which would be easily remembered, descriptive in character, simple and appropriate." The judges chose the name *photoplay* from among the exhibitors' twenty-five hundred submissions. The winning name was supposedly coined by Edgar Strakosch, a Sacramento, California, theater owner whose own nickelodeons were named Dreamland, Bijou, and Wonderland. Runners-up included *kinorama, mutodramic,* and *photodrome.*[6]

The film industry trade press remained skeptical about the transformative ability of new names. *Moving Picture World* thought it would be much more dignified for movie show places to combine the traditional name *theater* with one of "an enormous fund of names" available that would individualize the house. While *photoplay* would see some use as an elegant term for the films themselves and as the name of a well-known fan magazine, most exhibitors chose to stick with the descriptive name *theater* for their show places.[7]

An examination of the variety of nickelodeon theater names coined by exhibitors to create favorable associations in prospective patrons' minds with the attractions of the movie show provides tantalizing glimpses into the impact of the moviegoing experience on this first generation of film audiences. The names of small-town theaters, similar in many ways to those used by their urban counterparts, convey some of the novel appeal that movies held for nickelodeon patrons and also illustrate

the developing new ways for audiences to think about commercial amusement as a component of daily life.[8]

Many nickelodeon owners attempted to cement ties with their local communities by choosing names that created images of the movie theater as a friendly, familiar gathering place close to home. In the cities, creating a local identity was vital for exhibitors who were new to town and who were unknown to local residents. Some exhibitors played on their patrons' loyalties to their neighborhood, town, suburb, or state by naming theaters after their localities. In larger cities, nickelodeon exhibitors associated their theaters' names with landmarks like parks, plazas, or streets and found the names to be easily remembered by their patrons, who might themselves be rural newcomers to the city or recent immigrants.

For movie show operators in small towns, drawing on and furthering established entertainment traditions and local allegiances often meant retaining the name of the original building. Thus a new nickelodeon might be called the Town Hall, Opera House, Lyceum, or Auditorium. Although many of these town hall shows changed names as "real" movie theaters were built, through the 1930s in some of the smallest villages, people continued to attend movie shows in their opera houses. Sometimes the old opera house was just given a new name. It was significant for Cooperstown residents when the Bowne Opera House was renamed the Star Theater; the range of community activities once supported in the space had officially narrowed to focus on the movie show.

To further strengthen the neighborhood theme, nickelodeons might be named the Home Theater, the Community Theater, or the Family Moving Picture Parlor. These comfortable, domestic-sounding theater names offered patrons an image of moviegoing as a daily habit instead of an extraordinary experience. The movie theater, the name promised, could function as their Home away from home.[9]

Other nickelodeon names such as Superba, Ideal, Peerless, Elite, Bon Ton, and Unique assured skeptical neighbors of the high quality of the moving picture show and its appropriateness for family viewing. Sometimes theaters were named for other cities associated with high moral and entertainment standards. Movie theaters and dry-goods stores named The Boston could be found everywhere in the Midwest and West, and in the South the name New York christened stores and theaters that wished to be associated with big-city importance and up-to-dateness. Chicago, besides having a Boston Theater, was also home to a California Theater years before the film industry moved there. Perhaps this name was an al-

lusion to exoticism, to the state's mythic westernness, or to a promise of idyllic living amid sunshine and orange groves.[10]

Other names stressed the pleasure and escapism that tied moviegoing to the expanding world of leisure activities and consumer culture. Many theaters were named Bid-a-Wee, Pastime, Idle Hour, Amuse-U, Amusea, Comedy, Clown, Gaiety, Pleasant Hour, or Revelry. Baltimore had a Teddy Bear Moving Picture Parlor, whose name may have been chosen to capitalize on the popularity of President Theodore Roosevelt and the stuffed toy he inspired. Miriam Hansen notes the use of teddy bears by exhibitors to draw women into consumer culture with toy giveaways and references to frivolity in the theater. The association between dreaming, fantasy, or escape and the viewing of films in darkened rooms was clear to many early theater operators; the name Bijou Dream was adopted for theaters in every urban and small-town setting imaginable. Dreamland, Fairyland, Aladdin, Paradise, Avalon, Eden, and Wonderland were names found on nickelodeons from rural Maine to Des Moines, Iowa, and the West Coast. Following the lead of the Essanay contest, some nickelodeon owners gave their show places names emphasizing the novelty of the new form of entertainment, such as the Electric Theater, Arcade, Novelty, Theatorium, and Cameraphone.[11]

Exotic, foreign place names like Alhambra, Alcazar, or Valencia could be found on nickelodeon marquees in many states, their owners tying in to the first wave of popularity of Spanish and Mexican architecture and culture. In this era, Americans increasingly embraced Mexico as a place of intense sensory experiences—colorful sights, sounds, and tastes—that romantically appealed to those in search of new native inspirations for decoration. Within a few years the fad spread, and movie theater owners across the country adopted Mayan, Mediterranean, Arabic, and Egyptian names and exotic decorative schemes for their ever more elaborate new theaters.[12]

The flashing lights of the nickelodeons' façades and the glowing, pulsating screens that seemed to mesmerize movie audiences were also potent metaphors that managers used for theater names such as Star, Gem, Bijou (French for "jewel"), Aurora, Crescent, Crystal, Comet, Elektra, and Sun. Mythical gods and goddesses, magic, nature, and the supernatural all suggested fresh possibilities for names, for example, the Isis (in Denver and Augusta, Kansas) and the Apollo (in Chillicothe, Ohio.)[13]

Some theater owners dipped into a cache of names already popular

The staff and extended family of the Electric Theater, East St. Louis, Illinois, 1910. Courtesy of Q. David Bowers.

with vaudeville and legitimate theater owners to convey ideas of elegance, European grandeur, spectacle, and respectability, like the Royal, Queen, Princess, Regency, Rex, Empire, Empress, Monarch, Victoria, Strand, Palace, Rialto, Majestic, Lyric, Grand, Century, and Orpheum. A small one-hundred-seat movie theater in Worthington, Indiana, was christened the Hippodrome by an exhibitor with either huge ambitions or a wry sense of humor. It was one of the smallest of well over a hundred nickelodeons across the nation to ape New York City's famous fifty-five-hundred-seat Hippodrome, in 1905 the largest show house in the world.[14]

Paradoxically, while some film exhibitors aimed for elegance, others shunned the thought of connecting moviegoing with luxury, expense, and extravagance. The latter chose names that conjured images of their theaters as informal gathering places, inexpensive, affordable, and likely to be patronized every night rather than just on special occasions. They named their theaters the Nickel, Half-Dime, Nickelette, Big Nickel, Nickeldom, Nickeldome, Nickel-Odeon; and hundreds were simply called the Nickelodeon.[15]

Identification with a celebrity crept into a nickelodeon's name on occasion. Several theaters, such as Baltimore's Bunny Picture Theater, which opened in 1913, were named to honor the popular Vitagraph Company comedian John Bunny. When Bunny died suddenly in 1915, movie theaters in many regions were renamed to commemorate him. Movie theaters in several cities were named The Blue Mouse to associate themselves with a famous old Broadway production of that name. But, although a Baltimore exhibitor in the early 1910s named his house after his favorite Edison Manufacturing Company film actress, Gertrude McCoy, the practice of using celebrity names did not catch on. The use of novelty names for movie theaters declined as the more "serious" names evoking elegance began to dominate lists of theaters. There were fewer Bide-a-Wees and Amuseas, and more Strands. Hundreds of exhibitors in the early period had proudly named their theaters after themselves, but by the end of the nickelodeon era, family names on theater marquees indicated corporate or chain theaters such as the Stanley, Blank, and Saenger. In the early 1920s many new theaters in big cities were named for the film producers or distributors who owned them—Paramount, Fox, Loews. By the mid-1920s it became rare enough to be commented upon in the trade press when a new movie theater took its owner's name.[16]

The life span of most nickelodeon names in both small towns and big cities was brief. Many of the novelty- or celebrity-named theaters changed their appellations again as soon as the promotional benefits waned. Many exhibitors altered a nickelodeon's name whenever it was bought or sold, or at the owner's whim (making accurate censuses of a town's early movie theaters difficult, for turnovers among owners were frequent). Some nickelodeons seem to have assumed a new identity with each new coat of paint.

Theater owners took the naming of nickelodeons seriously, thinking that the name gave audiences their first impression of a house, that it could convey some idea about what the moviegoing experience was like, and that it lent a theater some distinctiveness. *Moving Picture World* counseled theater owners on the importance of the atmosphere created by a theater's name and environment to the patrons' moviegoing experience. "It is a wise exhibitor who realizes the importance of helping his pictures to cast their spell. The picture 'fan' wants to be allowed to drift comfortably into 'illusion land.'" The trade paper's allusions to make-believe worlds stemmed from the same impulse of nickelodeon owners to name their theaters Wonderland or Dreamland. Throughout the silent

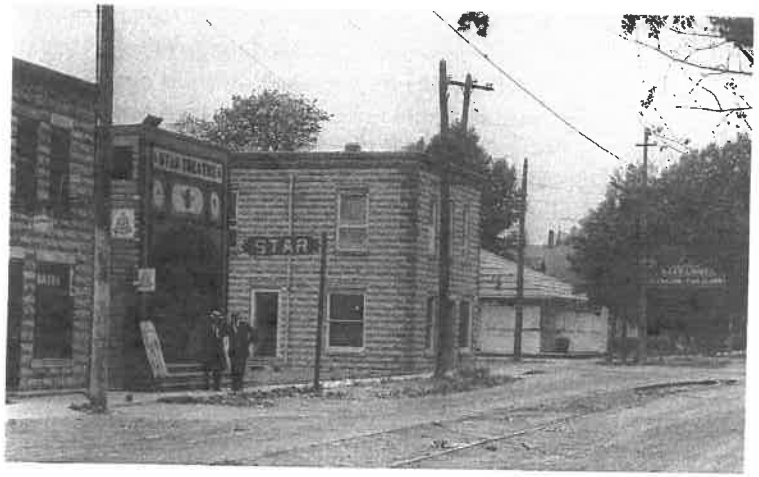
film era, exhibitors created a vocabulary to describe the experience of moviegoing and the environments in which it occurred.[17]

Nickelodeon Exteriors

Selling the show, in both small-town and urban nickelodeons, began in the immediacy of the theater building's front entrance. "To a certain extent, a theater is its own best advertisement," wrote a columnist for the exhibitor's journal *Nickelodeon* in 1909. "A picturesque and pleasing exterior, abundantly illuminated with a multitude of incandescent lights, constitutes advertising of the first order."[18]

Bare white incandescent lightbulbs were installed across the small façades of most nickelodeons; lightbulbs outlining doorways and arches, and spelling out the theater's name, were arranged in a celebration of the still-intriguing technology of electricity. The small-town middle class especially envied the many bright lights of the big city; this fact was not lost on either rural or urban film exhibitors, who incorporated as many electric elements into their theater exteriors as possible. "If the house is to catch the crowds, especially when there is so much competition, there must be an attractive front," a 1907 *Chicago Tribune* article advised nickelodeon owners. "Always there must be extensive arrangements for light, and a sign, fairly scintillant with electric bulbs, must extend out over the sidewalk, where it can be seen for blocks." *Moving Picture World* counseled novice exhibitors that "as to lights on the front, aside from expense of operation, there can scarcely be too brilliant an illumination within reasonable limits." The miniature Great White Way of illuminated shop signs and nickelodeon façades made Main Streets resemble Broadway or Coney Island in their residents' eyes, particularly in contrast to the enveloping evening darkness in small-town residential neighborhoods, where many homes had no electricity until the 1920s.[19]

Nickelodeon exhibitors reveled in the excesses of late Victorian decor, adorning their glowing theater façades with painted pressed-tin ceilings and walls crammed with ornamental plaster caryatids, cupids, mermaids, and other gewgaws chosen from the pages of the Decorators Supply Company catalog. There were a few boundaries of tastefulness, nevertheless, for conscientious nickelodeon owners, who were warned that "colored lights . . . seldom look well on a front. Somehow they seem to suggest cheapness and tawdriness."[20]



The Star Theater, Algonac, Michigan, sports bare white lightbulbs on its plain façade and sign, n.d. Courtesy of Q. David Bowers.

A 1913 juvenile novel produced by the Edward Stratemeyer Syndicate, *The Motion Picture Chums' First Venture, or Opening a Photo Playhouse in Fairlands,* captured the excitement generated in small towns by movie theater façades with a description of the opening of the first nickelodeon run by the plucky young film exhibitors-cum-detectives:

> [A]lthough Pep simply pressed a switch of the electric-lighting apparatus, it was with a sense of as much importance as if he was announcing the opening of the Panama Canal. Immediately the front of the new Wonderland burst into a dazzling flood of radiance. The biggest and best electric sign in Fairlands presented its face of fire to the public, glowed, was blank, flashed up again, and began its mission of inviting and guiding the public to the motion picture show.[21]

If these nickelodeon displays were awe inspiring to small-town dwellers, illuminated buildings and flashing, electrified advertising signs had become unexceptional sights for urban dwellers in the shopping districts of large cities by the 1910s. The big city's nickelodeon exteriors joined other urban displays such as billboards, neon signs, and brilliantly

lit department store windows and façades to create what historian William Leach has called "commercial guides through the spectacle of American abundance." The big cities' nickelodeon fronts often boasted huge electric and painted signs and three-dimensional terra-cotta figures of butterflies, nymphs, or the Statue of Liberty. Story-high vertical signs overhung the sidewalk with the theater's name spelled out in blinking lights, and rooftop signs attracted passersby, on foot or in streetcars, from blocks away. A film trade journal reporter wrote of the small-town, middle-class visitors' gaping wonder at the transformed urban amusement and shopping districts:

> How different it must seem to a man or woman who has not visited the city for, say, five years—nay, even less—to come here, and in the evening stroll down the avenues and streets. To see tall buildings outlined with lights, huge doorways filled with lighted figures, brilliant paintings, and the ever-present phonograph. But to see the outlay of lights and noise and color is to go back to the Midway at a fair.[22]

Once drawn to the theater front, potential nickelodeon patrons had to be convinced that the show inside was not to be missed. Posters illustrating dramatic moments from current films and upcoming attractions were plastered everywhere—on the fronts of theater buildings, in wall frames, in lobbies, on sign boards, on sidewalk easels, and on neighborhood billboards and fences. Movie posters, like advertising for other consumer goods, heightened the excitement and expectation surrounding the movie show, adding layers of melodramatic, colorful meaning to the brief black-and-white films seen by viewers. Instead of using enlarged versions of the more prosaically posed photographs taken on a movie production set, exhibitors favored the circus poster style—boldly colored lithographs of artists' interpretations of a film's most exciting, sensual, or dramatic scenes. Sometimes nickelodeon-era movie posters—being stock melodramatic illustrations of cowboy-and-Indian fights, shipwreck scenes, out-of-control locomotives, and heroines dangling from precipices— contained more action than the films themselves. Their lurid exaggerations or outright misrepresentations of risqué or violent film action constituted a source of social critics' movie censorship campaigns.[23]

Nickelodeon movie posters and exterior decorations were, for many patrons, the most fascinating elements of the movie theater's contributions to street culture. One Baltimore man remembered childhood days

spent entranced by the posters and façade of his neighborhood theater. "Present day youngsters would probably laugh at the looks of the New Gem. But to me it was completely fascinating, what with its painted wreaths and flowers on the outside, its murals of Swiss mountain scenes—and a thrilling painting of the Titanic disaster—on the walls." More than just an enticement into the movie show, lobby decorations and action-packed posters created a spectacle in front of the theater and on the sidewalk that was free to view, at least until the theater manager hustled loiterers away.[24]

Music, verbal banter, and noise were also elements of the nickelodeon's outdoor advertising scheme. Many exhibitors incorporated the trumpetlike horn of a phonograph into their theater façades so that the horn projected its sound toward the street. Other managers had electrically operated automatic pianos installed in such a manner that they could be heard outside as well as inside. Some early motion picture exhibitors stationed barkers outside their theaters' front entrances to coax people inside, and others sent "ballyhoo wagons" to surrounding neighborhoods to promote the show with loud announcements and music. Reports in the exhibitors' trade press noted that, in several cities, neighboring shopkeepers were furious about the obtrusive music and fought to mute nickelodeons' outdoor phonographs. The city of St. Louis passed an ordinance that required anyone desirous of setting up a nickelodeon to obtain signed permission from the owners of neighboring stores and homes, not only next door but also across the street, stating that they would not object to the noise. As phonographs became less of an attention getter, however, most theaters reduced their outdoor use.[25]

The precedent for the attractive nickelodeon exterior as customer lure came from the realm of amusement. Circuses, dime museums, and traveling theatrical troupes plastered the towns they visited with posters, and they used handbills, barkers, and other ballyhoo. Despite their advertising efforts, these shows were often of brief duration in any one town. Nickelodeon managers also adopted promotional techniques from neighboring retail stores, which experimented with decoration of an increasingly theatrical nature, similarly contributing color, excitement, and new, unfulfilled longings to street culture. "It is all well enough to let the store show [nickelodeon] man make the circus display outside his place to attract the crowd," *Moving Picture World* advised new exhibitors. "Many legitimate business places that are not in the amusement field do that." Thus motion picture theaters blended advertising tactics from both

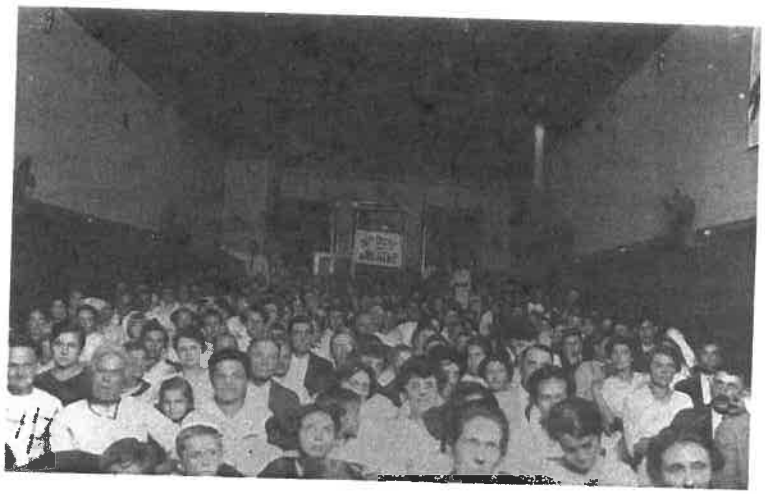
amusement and retail sources to attract their audiences, helping to blur the boundaries in consumer culture between selling and entertainment.[26]

Nickelodeon Interiors

Film exhibitors concentrated their decorative efforts on their nickelodeon theaters' exteriors, paying little attention to interior appointments. As one surveyor reported, "[F]ew nickelodeons, no matter how gaudy or alluring on the outside, can be described as more than puritanically simple within. They are little more than academic halls, given over to a direct and vital appeal to the eye from the screen alone." Much of the reason for the plainness of nickelodeon interiors stemmed from exhibitors' practicality; nickelodeon-era film projectors required complete darkness in order to achieve a sharp, bright image on the screen. Some exhibitors kept their theaters pitch black all day and evening, causing patrons to stumble up and down the aisles while trying to find an empty seat among the closely packed rows of kitchen chairs, benches, or theater seats in the little halls that seated between fifty and three hundred viewers. There seemed to be little need or room for interior decoration under the circumstances.[27]

Dark nickelodeon auditoriums posed not only something of a safety hazard but, in the opinion of social critics, also a moral hazard. Wild rumors circulated in some cities that nefarious evildoers stuck young women with syringes or narcotic-tipped pins in the dark theaters and spirited them away into white slavery. In real life, dark movie theaters were popular rendezvous for young courting couples. Inevitably, this aspect of the moviegoing experience was seized upon by popular culture. In 1909, Albert Von Tilzer, a prolific Tin Pan Alley composer, wrote, together with Junie McCree, a follow-up song to his recent hit, "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," entitled "Let's Go in to a Picture Show." Like the earlier song, the chorus of this catchy, waltz-tempo tune is also sung by a spirited young woman who wants to be "out with the crowd" having fun; what is different here is that Mary also appreciates the nickelodeon theater's dark interiors.

> Let's go in to a picture show,
> Because I love it so.
> On the square, there ain't anywhere



Audience in the auditorium of the Boody Theater, location and date unknown. Courtesy of Q. David Bowers.

> I would rather go.
> There's where ev'ry girl and her beau
> Always go to spoon, you know.
> So let's go in to a picture show,
> for a good old time.[28]

As Mary convinces her reluctant boyfriend Johnny to give the nickelodeon show a try, she sings rejoicingly that "the house is so dark when you start in to spark, [with] no fear of lights." Von Tilzer had never actually been to a baseball game before he wrote his famous song; if he never attended the movies, either, then he was at least attuned to popular comment on some of the nickelodeon's attractions. Most Tin Pan Alley songs about new inventions, such as "(Come Away with Me, Lucille) in My Merry Oldsmobile," celebrated their possibilities for amorous encounters. "Let's Go in to a Picture Show" acclaimed the nickelodeon both as a site of Main Street community activity "on the square" and as a semiprivate rendezvous for romance.