

Sunday movies created controversy in 1919

"First — Because God has set apart the Sabbath day exclusively for His worship, and the works of necessity and mercy. The moving picture show is not the worship of God, neither is it the work of necessity or mercy."

—*Bloomington Weekly Courier*, Feb. 7, 1919.

Though the Bloomington Ministerial Alliance usually saw eye-to-eye, a definite difference of opinion was forcefully called to the public's attention on the front page of the *Bloomington Weekly Courier* on Feb. 7, 191. At issue was whether movie theaters should be allowed to have showings on Sunday afternoon.

Apparently, the Rev. William Burrows of the alliance had sent a letter to the editor endorsing the Sunday showings. His rationale was that the theaters would show only moral pictures. Some of his colleagues seriously doubted that.

C.L. Plymate, president of the



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

Bloomington Ministerial Alliance, fired off a letter to the editor printed under the headline "More Comment on Sunday Movie bill." Plymate pointed out that on most issues the members of the alliance are in agreement, but Burrows did not speak for the others.

Plymate added, "We will gladly go any length with him, or with anyone, in any movement — any new thing that will be for the best interests of the community, for its uplift, its development. We would in no wise oppose any legislation, or any plan or purpose that would safeguard or foster or further the best interests of the community. But we feel that such use of the Sabbath as

the Rev. Burrows suggests will not be for the best interests of the community."

That was certainly plain enough. Plymate was not alone in his opinion. Beside his letter was another from the Rev. G.R. Steele and others. Their particular approach was a Biblical one — disregard of the Sabbath is the cause of war, pestilence and famine.

Steele gave other reasons, citing scenes from the Bible and ending with "The best picture show for Sabbath afternoon is for parents to gather their children about them in their own homes and teach them the way of life."

The letters to the editor overflowed to the last page of the Feb. 7 edition of the *Weekly Courier*. The one printed there was written by a man whose judgement was truly respected in the community — James A. Woodburn, an Indiana University professor of history and pillar of his church.

In his opening, the professor gave Burrows the benefit of the doubt by writing, "I have no doubt that Mr. Burrows wishes to promote the moral and religious welfare of the community. I wish he had suggested something else to that end than the Sunday movies."

Woodburn pointed out that the business of movie producers is profit, not moral enlightenment. Apparently, Burrows had suggested that local distributors would show only wholesome movies on Sunday afternoon, but the professor commented on that. "Can we have any real assurance that the Sunday movies will be different or better than the weekday movies?"

Furthermore, suggested Woodburn, "Could a man like Burrows be able to control or improve the films any more than he is able to do now, so that he might be able to see them in safety?" He was very skeptical about the wording of the bill up before the Indiana General As-

sembly, which said, in part, "...that our present Sunday law 'shall not be construed to prohibit the operation of motion picture exhibitions of historical, moral or educational nature after the hours of 1 p.m.'"

Woodburn recalled how thousands of Bloomingtonians gave generously to a fund "to relieve the awful suffering in Syria and Armenia, and under his (Burrows') leadership Monroe County was the first in the state to go over the top." The professor concluded, "I wish Mr. Burrows would lead in causes and directions in which we can follow him."

Woodburn may have won the rhetoric-on-paper battle, but ultimately he and the Bloomington Ministerial Alliance lost the Sunday afternoon movie war. And it was just in time for impressionable teenagers to see flappers on the screen.

H-T 2/27/95