**Herndon’s First Movie Theatre**

*By Barbara Glakas*

Today the building at 757 Elden Street is occupied by a long-time Herndon business, the Upholstery Shop. However, many years ago this building was Herndon’s first movie theatre.

According to a member of the Reed family and to Ms. Virgie Wynkoop -- who was 100 years old when she wrote her memories of Herndon in 1979 -- Mr. Thomas E. Reed built the movie hall in 1921, ran it for a number of years and then later sold it to a man named Henry Lego.

The Reeds owned much of the land on the block where the theatre was located. According to the son of Thomas E. Reed II, his father (who was born 1894) built the theatre and ran it for a few years. Mrs. Reed worked in the ticket booth. Reed’s son confirmed that a man named Henry Lego came along who was knowledgeable about movies. Lego also owned another movie house in Purcellville. Mr. Reed rented the Herndon movie house to Mr. Lego and then eventually sold it to him.

There were ads and articles written about Herndon’s movie theatre in *The Herndon News-Observer* and the *Fairfax Herald* newspapers which date back as early as the 1920s. The earliest ads, that range from 1924 to 1927, refer to a Herndon movie house called “Elden Hall,” sometimes referred to as “Elden Street Hall.” Movies cost $.25 for children and $.50 for adults. Mr. T.E. Reed was listed as the proprietor. They advertisements included showings of “The Ten Commandments,” “The Big Parade” and “Birth of a Nation.” A vintage movie poster displayed in Herndon’s Depot Museum advertises the showing of the 1923 silent drama film “The Trail of the Lonesome Pine” at Elden Hall.

By the 1930s, newspaper ads that spoke of Herndon’s movie house referred to it as “The Herndon Theatre.” It is theorized that “Elden Hall” and “The Herndon Theatre” were the same movie house that had simply changed names when the ownership changed.

Census records show that Mr. Henry J. Lego was born in 1885 in Illinois, where he lived through his teen years. He served in WWI as a Sergeant in the U.S. Army from 1918 – 1919. He completed four years of college. In 1941, while in Herndon, he became one of the charter members of Herndon’s American Legion Post #91.

A 1930 census showed that Mr. Lego was living in Washington, D.C. and was a “moving picture salesman.” A 1940 census showed that he was a movie theatre owner, living on Elden Street in Herndon, boarding with Mrs. Roberta Detwiler. Mrs. Detwiler became a widow after her husband, Dr. Ben Detwiler, died in 1931. Her house at 825 Elden Street was just two blocks from the theatre. Mr. Lego indicated in the census that he had been boarding at the Detwiler house since at least 1935. Also living in the house were Roberta’s daughter and granddaughter. The daughter, Beulah Anderson, was listed in the census as a movie theatre ticket seller. The granddaughter, Helen Anderson, was listed as a motion picture stenographer.

Ads that appear in several 1932 editions of the *Fairfax Independent* newspaper boasted that the Herndon Theatre had “the latest improved sound equipment.” It had “high class feature pictures, comedies and selected cartoons.” That year movie tickets cost 25 cents for adults and 15 cents for those under 12.

Frances Darlington Simpson, who spent summers in Herndon during the early to middle 1900s, recalls her memories of the theatre in her 1963 book, **Virginia Country Life and Cooking*:***

*“Across the railroad tracks is the [railroad] station and beyond that a little way is the theatre. What a fascination was that theatre or “movie hall” as it was called.  Today it is used for dances and meetings as the Herndonians are very much au courant with television and not concerned with movies, but when we were children, it was a real treat to go with our friends to the movies at the “movie hall”—not that we always saw one when we got there.  Sometimes the reel would break, other times a tremendous storm would come up and the electricity power would be shut off, leaving the player piano to carry on alone in the darkness while we crept home with flashlights and once more an angry skunk sought refuge in the movie hall, causing the audience to disperse in three minutes flat.  Still it was great fun.”*

A 1935 news article reported that a case of “infantile paralysis disease,” or polio, had been reported in Herndon, as well as in other areas of Virginia. The County Health Officer suggested suspending all gatherings of children (e.g., Sunday schools, picnics, etc.) until the danger of the disease had passed. As a result, Mr. Lego decided to temporarily close the theatre until the Health Officer said the danger had passed. Mr. Lego also closed the theatres he owned in Purcellville and Occoquan. The Herndon Theatre was reopened about 25 days later.

Many people who still live in Herndon today have vivid memories of the theatre. One long-time Herndon resident, who attended movies at the theatre in the 1930s and 1940s, recalled that it cost 16 cents to see a movie at this one-screen movie house. She said that theatre-goers had to go up a few stairs as they entered the movie house to get to the ticket booth. Inside the theatre was a small balcony in the back of the theatre, near where the projector was located. She said the shows usually started with a war news reel, a cartoon, a movie short and then the main feature.

In a Herndon document called the Oral History Project, 1991-2000, another early resident recalled how her husband used to play the piano in the theatre so that people would have music while the picture was going on. “It was like a roller so all you’d have to do was pump it. And that was the music and everyone thought that was wonderful.”

Another person recalled that they showed, “lots of western movies and double features on Saturdays.”  She also recalled that on Saturdays, “they not only showed news and a cartoon they also had a serial [movie], which you had to keep going to on Saturdays to find out what happened next.” Some of her favorite westerns featured Randolph Scott, Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, and Hopalong Cassidy. Love stories were also popular with memorable actors such as Tyrone Power and Clark Gable.

Other theatre-goers from the 1950’s remember the movie house having dark red velvet curtains. In the early days the seats were all wooden, but some people recalled that the seats were later cushioned. The floor was flat so anyone who had a tall person sit in front of them may have had a hard time seeing. The theater was not air conditioned but had big fans that blew cool air from the basement under the stage.

Two residents recalled that when they got older and were dating they did not go to the Herndon Theatre but instead went to other bigger theatres such as the ones in Fairfax, Washington D.C., the State Theatre in Falls Church and a drive-in theatre on Route 29.

The Herndon Theatre not only showed movies but also later hosted many other activities. One resident recalls the stage in the theatre, where she attended dances while in high school.

Another resident who grew up in Herndon in the 1950s and 1960s described how a small snack bar was built on one side of the theatre, with a few booths and stools at the counter.  It was called the “Hornet’s Nest” and it sold burgers, hot dogs, and milk shakes.  They had mugs there for all the high school football players. The theatre is where everybody went after the games.

Mr. Lego later got married and lived with his wife on Spring Street, across from Wood Street. Neighbors remember his back yard being filled with azaleas and magnolias. Mr. Lego died in 1960 and was buried in Herndon’s Chestnut Grove Cemetery.

It is not exactly clear when the Herndon Theatre closed its doors for good. But according to the memories of other Herndon residents and local business owners, there were several other businesses that occupied the old theatre building after the movie house closed. Some of those businesses included a pool hall called “Rack & Cue Billiards,” an antique furniture store called “Touch of Europe,” and the Moose Lodge.

One long-time Herndon resident remembers that the “Rack & Cue” opened sometime in the mid-1960s. In addition to having pool tables, they also had several pin ball machines and served sandwiches.  Indeed, ads in 1968 and 1969 editions of the *Fairfax Herald* newspaper described the pool hall as having, “Family Fun for Everyone,” boasting the “finest and largest sandwiches in the area.”

The family-owned Upholstery Shop, which was established in 1977, moved into the old theatre building in 1996 and has been there ever since. If you go in the Upholstery Shop today, you can still see the front stage where dances were held as well as the balcony in the rear.

The interesting brick facade we see on the front of the building today was not part of the original construction, but was added on later, possibly in the 1960’s. Like many old buildings in Herndon, the former Herndon Theatre building has wooden frame construction. The original wood siding has since been replaced by HardiPlank siding, a fiber-cement material that has a wood-like appearance. It has a cellar and a tin roof. The foundation was once improved due to the erosion caused by the creek that runs underneath Elden Street.

Another Herndon movie theatre later opened at the Dulles Park Shopping Center. Even later the Worldgate Theaters opened. Despite the newer high-tech movie theatres, many life-long Herndon residents still have fond memories of Herndon’s original movie house at 757 Elden Street.

*About this column: “Remembering Herndon’s History” is a regular* Herndon Patch *feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon’s past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of “Remembering Herndon’s History” columns is available on the Historical Society website at* [*www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org*](http://www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org)*.*

*The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society’s website at* [*www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org*](http://www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org)*, and the Historical Society’s Facebook page at* [*https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory*](https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory) *for more information.*

*Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact Charlie Waddell at 703-435-2520 or charliewaddell@cox.net.*