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Helen Gilmour,
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F.B.S.R.

March, 1992.

Approx. 1500 words.

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Helen Gilmour.

Since I was a little girl I've enjoyed going to "The Pictures", no doubt largely due to the fact that my Father was "in the business"; and so I've decided to write about Picture Houses or Cinemas.

My earliest recollection is of the Carrick Cinema in Maybole, partly owned and managed by my Father, the previous Proprietor having been Victor Biddall of the Fairground Family.

The "Carrick Cinema House" as it was called, was opened in 1912 and must have been a great acquisition to the townspeople of Maybole.

The frontage as I remember it was largely covered by billboards displaying current and coming attractions. Just inside the entrance door was the small cash desk where one could gain admission for a few pennies - or perhaps even a jelly jar!

Inside the hall the best seats were firm upholstered tip-up seats, but the 'cheap' seats were simple wooden forms certainly not designed for comfort.

The films of that time of course were Silent, the only sound being the film running through the ratchets of the projection machine and causing a continual ticking noise.

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A pianist provided musical accompaniment to the film and had to keep a watchful eye on the screen so that the music was appropriate to the scene. I believe that on one occasion at the screening of "Desert Song" he failed to notice the camel train crossing the desert and when his attention was drawn to this he aptly changed his tune to "The Camels are Comin"!

I was allowed to go to the Saturday Matinee accompanied by an older cousin, and generally in possession of a peeled apple in a poke to enjoy during the performance. If the films were Silent, the audience certainly was not when watching, among others, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd. My cousin tended to get rather carried away with the escapades of Harold Lloyd and on one occasion, climbing with Harold up the face of a building my cousin rose gradually from his seat. Consequently when Harold slipped Bert had to pick himself up off the floor.

I particularly remember being allowed to accompany my Grandmother to two religious films - "King of Kings" and "Ben Hur". I'm sure we saw "Ben Hur" on each of five evenings. As a result Grandma was the subject of some teasing about falling in love with Ramon Novarro - the screen idol of the time - who played the part of "Ben Hur".

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In 1931 a small company of local people was formed and the "New Carrick" Cinema was built to replace the old one and with it came "The Talkies".

The "New Carrick" had an attractive entrance foyer, an auditorium with a stage to accommodate occasional variety 'turns' as well as local talent at "Go-As-You-Please" performances, and a balcony.

The sound system was installed by B.T.H. (British-Thomson-Houston), The other innovation in the new cinema was the installation of a number of divans in the balcony, at that time referred to as "chummy" seats. They were designed like two seats but without a dividing arm and so were particularly attractive to lads and their lassies.

The "New Carrick" was well patronised by the people of Maybole and the surrounding district.

This undoubtedly was an incentive to my Father to look for sites for cinemas in other towns. There followed the construction and opening of "The Doon" in Dalmellington, then "The Regal" in Dairy, both small towns to which a cinema must have been a great asset to the life of the community. The next venture was the purchase of a site in New Road, Ayr; and a venture it was as there already existed four cinemas within the boundaries of the town.

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However, cinemas were fast growing in popularity and the newly formed Newton-on-Ayr Picture House Company was prepared to take the gamble. Consequently "The Ritz" was constructed, my Father was appointed to be Managing Director and the family moved from Maybole to reside in Ayr in January, 1936. "The Ritz" was opened by Provost Galloway of Ayr on 5th February, 1936, and proved very successful indeed. It is interesting to note that the sound equipment installed was the Gaumont British "Q" type full range sound equipment similar to that installed in the Cunard White Star Liner "Queen Mary".

Unfortunately tragedy struck in November of the same year when the cinema was largely destroyed by fire during the night.

I remember clearly the shock news Father received on the telephone at about 1 am. The policeman on the beat had reported seeing fire in the Ritz. Father was soon on his way to the cinema, to find the Fire Brigade fighting a fierce blaze. From a house opposite he 'phoned Mother to say there was going to be nothing left but the four walls. It seemed unbelievable; how could such a thing happen.

The cause of the blaze was reckoned to be the careless act of some person seated at the front, flicking a cigarette end at the screen. Nothing /

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Nothing was apparent at the close of the cinema but the black masking surrounding the screen must have been smouldering. When the fire eventually reached the perforated rubber screen it would spread very quickly up to and along the ceiling which fell in on the seating. The scene the following day was one of devastation and heartbreak.

However, the Building Contractors were back on the job as soon as possible, reconstruction started and in July of 1937 "The Ritz" re-opened. From then on throughout the years of the Second World War cinema was big business.

My Father negotiated the 'booking' of his feature films and supporting programmes and it was not uncommon to screen three programme changes each week. There were special weeks featuring Jeanette Macdonald-Nelson Eddy films which always attracted packed houses. But the programme I well remember as being a big box office success featured "Dracula" supported by "Frankenstein" - two horror films of their time. On the final Saturday evening performance the queue was so long that the majority of the patrons missed "Frankenstein", being seated in time to see only the feature film "Dracula". Such was the disappointment of so many that it was decided to re-run "Frankenstein" after the feature thereby/

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thereby letting everyone enjoy the full programme which on that particular evening finished at almost midnight.

At that time cinema performances ran continuously from 2.00 pm., till 10.30 pm., daily, except Sunday. The programme generally included the feature film, a supporting feature, a news bulletin and possibly a comedy, a cartoon or even a serial, lasting at least three hours; and all for admission prices of Sixpence, Ninepence and One Shilling in the Stalls and One Shilling & Ninepence in the Balcony; and with a cake of Cadbury's Chocolate for Twopence. How lucky we were!

Father's next venture took him to Strathaven where a site was purchased and another "Ritz" was constructed. It was opened in 1938 by Sir Harry Lauder, accompanied by his niece Miss Greta Lauder, who lived only a short distance outside Strathaven in the large house built for Sir Harry and which he named "Lauder Ha".

Also in 1938 the sixth and final site was purchased in Blantyre where "The Broadway" was built and opened. Within seven years this small private group had six cinemas functioning very successfully

but the threat and outbreak of the Second World War put an end to the search for further cinema sites.

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By 1938, six cinemas of different companies existed in the Town of Ayr done.

THE ODEON in Burns Statue Scare was the most up-to-date being opened in 1938 - one of many throughout the country bearing the same name. The Head of the Group at that time was Oscar Deutch and from him came the idea - Oscar Deutch Entertains Other Nations - ODEON.

GREEN'S PLAYHOUSE in Boswell Park, in its original form suffered destruction by fire and was rebuilt in the late Twenties/early Thirties. I understand music in the first Playhouse was provided by an Orchestra. When rebuilt, the Playhouse was the largest cinema with a seating capacity of 3,000. The wide white marble staircase leading to the balcony was quite a feature; and there was a Cafe for snacks and teas.

THE PICTURE HOUSE in High Street, later referred to as THE GAUMONT also had an attractive tearoom at street level where one could enjoy a meal before ascending a carpeted staircase to the cinema. In the interval between performances an organist delighted audiences with music from a large Jardine Three Manual cinema organ. A cheery coal fire burned in a large ornate fireplace in the entrance vestibule - a rather unusual feature in a

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THE ORIENT in Main Street was designed both outside and inside to depict an Eastern theme, with domed mosques at either side of the stage. Those were later removed to make way for the wide screen.

THE RITZ in New Road had no such attractions but it did have a canopy entrance into which at least part of the queue of patrons on a busy night could shelter from the cold and rain while awaiting admission. A former patron recalled to me that the Manager's umbrella was handed out to the first couple just outside the canopy and as the queue moved forward the umbrella moved back until the last couple returned it to the Manager.

THE REGAL in Prestwick Road was a small privately owned cinema, latterly managed by the proprietor's daughter. In addition to the six cinemas in Ayr, there were two - The Picture House and The Broadway - in the neighbouring town of Prestwick.

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The success of the cinema business gradually declined with the advent of Television in the Fifties. This to a degree eventually forced the closure and demolition of some cinemas and the change of use of others to Bingo Halls to meet the growing popularity of this Game. My acceptance of Television at home was reluctant. I held the view that no-one would want to sit at home each evening to watch Television and that there would always be a picture-going public; but it saddened me each time I saw another cinema closing down. It was the end of an era in cinemas as the picture-goers of yesteryear knew them - but not entirely 'the end'.

THE ODEON is the local 'survivor' but no longer is it one large cinema. In recent years alterations have taken place within the building to form Four small cinemas. So it is still possible to go to "the pictures" where a choice of films is available within the complex. When my Father retired from "The Ritz" in 1945 his prediction was that in the cinema business, like the shops, "the wee man would be squeezed out one way or another by the larger groups". How true that has proved to be.

I still enjoy a visit to "the pictures" on occasion when, I may add, there comes a film devoid of horror and violence something in the real meaning of Entertainment and Escapism.

Helen Gilmour,

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March, 1992.