

1976-1998 The Biscayne III in the Biscayne Mall, once a prime shopping area with 30 stores, now completely razed and replaced with a new shopping area.	1985 Uptown on Broadway stops showing movies. Today it houses Slackers.	1987 Commonwealth Theatre threatens to turn The Missouri Theatre into a triplex and stops showing films there.	Jan. 7, 1988 Last movie shown in the Missouri Theatre, which is sold a few days later to Missouri Symphony Society.	1990 The theater at 17 N. Ninth St. becomes The Blue Note, a live music venue.	1997 Campus 1&2, 1102 E. Broadway, closes.	1998 Ragtag Film Society shows its first film at the Varsity, now The Blue Note.	2000 Ragtag Film Society moves from the Varsity and opens storefront theater at 23 N. 10th St.	2008-present The Ragtag Film Society opens a two-screen cinema at 10 Hitt St.	2009 38,605: the number of indoor movie screens according to the National Association of Theatre Owners.
1984 18,327: the number of movie screens tops the 1948 figure of 17,811, according to the National Association of Theatre Owners.	1986-2000 The Columbia Mall 4.	1987 \$7 billion, in 2005 dollars: a new low in the amount people spend attending movies since 1959, according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, US Department of Commerce.	1988 Theater at The Blue Note location stops showing movies and becomes the Comic Book Club.	1992 The Forum 8 at 1209 Katy Parkway replaces the one-screen Forum and is bought by Goodrich in 1998.	1997-Present Hollywood Theater's Stadium 14, 2800 Goodwin Pointe, opens with a total of 2,700 seats.	1998 The Forum 8 is bought by Goodrich.	2008 \$8.7 billion, in 2005 dollars: the amount of money spent on going to the movies, according to Bureau of Economic Analysis, US Department of Commerce. It is still below the \$10.9 billion (2005 dollars) spent in 1959.		

Sources: US Consumer spending on movies, Personal Expenditures on movie theaters, billions of 2005 dollars/source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, US Department of Commerce; Number of indoor screens/source: National Association of Theatre Owners; Sources for history: Paul Sturtz of Ragtag, Marge Berchek of the Missouri Symphony Society Historic Committee



PHOTOS BY JENNIFER KETTLER

Marge Berchek works on hanging her exhibit on historic vaudeville and moving picture theaters in Columbia. On display at the Missouri Theatre, the exhibit will open in July.

Hall Theatre in 1928. Businessmen often attended the movies on their lunch hour because movies were shorter in the early years.

Berchek, during her voluminous research, came up with a local newspaper article from 1909 that quoted a theater manager saying he could count on his fingers the number of businessmen who didn't drop in during the week.

Berchek also found that in 1922, the film industry was the fourth-largest industry in the nation. By the mid-1920s, 50 million people attended the movies each week — at a time when the nation's population was only 115 million.

Columbia residents shared the national pastime. In 1909, there were approximately 3,300 theater seats for Columbia's population of more than 12,000. These included the Airdome, the Columbia Theater, the Broadway Odeon, the Elite and the "M." All of these are now gone or so transformed you wouldn't know they'd been theaters unless it was pointed out to you.

Yet three remain in bricks and mortar in recognizable forms. These Ninth Street theaters truly reflect the move in the 1920s toward movie palaces. The Missouri Theatre, the Hall Theatre and the Varsity totaled 3,591 seats by 1930, when Columbia's population had edged up to nearly 15,000.

Today, with Columbia's population hovering at 100,000, four venues, the Missouri Theatre, which shows movies periodically; the Forum 8; the Hollywood Theaters Stadium 14; and the Ragtag Theater, provide 4,227 movie seats.

People can now watch movies via DVD rentals, Netflix mailings, on-demand cable and satellite services and online streaming. They can watch them on TVs, computer screens and even mobile phones.

Nevertheless, the number of people buying movie tickets has been fairly steady in the past 15 years, according to BoxOfficeMojo.com. Sales rose to 1.2 million in 1995 and, after reaching a high of 1.58 million in 2000, dropped to 1.39 million in 2008 before moving back up to 1.42 million last year. And ticket sales are ahead of the 2009 pace so far this year, according to industry tracking sites.

The local theater storyline

From the construction of the Airdome in 1906 at 10th and Walnut streets to the opening of Ragtag Cinema in 2008, the local theater scene has seen its ups and downs.

In 1909, when the Gem operated on the corner of Walnut and Ninth streets, an advertisement declared: "The Gem is already THE POPULAR AMUSEMENT PLACE." It was the place to go for "pictures that talk and sing," according to an item from Berchek's display. New programs were unveiled on Mondays, Wednesday and Fridays. And you could get all this for 10 cents for adults, 5 cents for children. (So what is that worth today? According to measuringworth.com, 10 cents would be worth \$2.43 in 2009 dollars.)

Movie theaters started as nickelodeons — a combination of the word *odeon*, which means theater in Greek, and a nickel, the price of watching anything from pictures accompanied by music and singing to short silent moving pictures. Some of the early theaters were simply stores filled with chairs or benches. By 1908, true short movies were being shown; the programs changed two or three times a week, according to a history developed by Paul Sturtz, co-owner of the Ragtag and co-founder of the True/False Film Festival.

These movie palaces were a place to truly get away from it all — and people did. Some movie theaters offered child care so mothers could go to the movies during the day.

Then in the Roaring '20s, movie theater architecture centered on the idea that movie palaces should include luxury, whimsy and exoticism, which gave working people a peek at the trappings of the rich, according to the book *Great American Movie Theaters* by David Naylor. These movie palaces were a place to truly get away

from it all — and people did. Some movie theaters offered child care so mothers could go to the movies during the day.

But moviegoers could not escape reality for long. The stock market crashed on October 29, 1929, and the Great Depression lingered on. By today's prices, tickets back then sound cheap — 35 cents for adults in 1927. But that would be about \$4.34 in 2009 dollars.

However, Bill Crawford said people found ways to economize. The president emeritus of the Boone County Historical Society, Crawford moved to Columbia in 1938 and recalls going to the Varsity.

"It was beautiful," he said, noting that on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays you could go to the movies there and see an advertisement, a news reel, then double feature and vaudeville, all for 25 cents. To save money, people would bring sandwiches to eat, and he recalls bringing brown bags and sacks of stuff from home to save money. The entertainment, he said, would last two hours, and you needed something to eat.

Although they were tough times economically, Crawford said people still attended the movies. "It was the only thing to do in town; nobody had cars," he said, so the cluster of theaters drew people downtown.

Marian Ohman, who was born in 1926, recalled how she and her friends rode their bikes downtown to take in a show in the afternoon. One day she and a friend slipped out of Hickman High School to see a movie at the Varsity, but her teacher tracked her down, escorted her out of the theater and returned her to school for afternoon classes.

As the economy rebounded after World War II, downtown theaters were hit by two new trends: television and the mass move to the suburbs. Families moved west of what had been the far end of town, West Boulevard, and kids could no longer walk or ride their bikes to downtown theaters like Ohman used to do.

Of the downtown movie palaces, only two retain their mission of entertainment: the Missouri Theatre Center for the Arts and The Blue Note. The other glorious movie palace is now a restaurant.

Where are they now?

Of the downtown movie palaces, only two retain their mission of entertainment: the Missouri Theatre Center for the Arts and The Blue Note. The other glorious movie palace is now a restaurant.

The Missouri Theatre shows movies periodically and is a venue for the True/False documentary film festival but more typically is a venue for a multitude of musical events and some modern dance performances.

The theater is used for productions of live music and theater for about 50 days a year, which is not nearly enough, according to R. Eric Staley, MTCA chief executive officer. The MTCA still needs to raise \$2.5 million for the recent \$10 million renovation of the building. About \$400,000 remains in dispute and awaits a decision from an arbitration judge.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Missouri Theatre showed two or three movies each week, but Staley indicated there are no plans to revive those cinematic practices. His focus in the nine months he's been on the job has been to streamline the MCTA's business model and develop a schedule of productions to keep it in the black.

The other two movie palaces built in the 1920s still have the doors open, but one is offering sandwiches while the other brings top-notch live music to Columbia.

The Blue Note began life as the Varsity in 1927. It was built for roughly \$100,000, or \$1.2 million in 2009 dollars, according to measuringworth.com. The site was previously the home of The Star, built in 1916 and razed to make way for the Varsity. (It had seating for roughly 1,000 people but no provisions for African-Americans to attend. In contrast, the Missouri Theatre offered African-Americans a side door and part of the balcony prior to the erasure of segregation.)

(continued on Page 20)

CONNECTING YOU

TO CUSTOMERS

without connecting you to your desk.

We know that technology is essential to everyone's daily life. That's why our goal is to provide user-friendly products, services, and solutions to make technology assist your day-to-day business needs conveniently and cost-effectively.

Telephone & VOIP Systems
Voice/Fiber/Data Cabling
IT Solutions • Service & Installation

920 North Trade Wind Parkway • Suite F
 Columbia, MO 65201 • (573) 499-9991
www.getCIT.com