



# The History of Jerseyville's Theaters

by Jersey County Historical Society  
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The Stadium Theatre is the most recent chapter in the movie theater's long history in Jerseyville. S.E. Pirtle opened the theater on November 26, 1949, and many of those who enjoyed catching a "show" at the Stadium as young children now enjoy watching movies with their grandchildren and great grandchildren in the same theater.

The Stadium Theatre and its rich history are a wonderful legacy of the many theaters that have entertained Jersey County residents over the past 168 years.

One of the city's first theaters opened around 1850 on the second floor of the Villinger building, where State Street Antiques is now located. The Villinger Opera House, also known as Villinger Hall, showcased live entertainment, both local and national.

This photo (taken between 1888 and 1890) shows the Villinger building, which housed Cory Hardware on the first level and the theater on the second floor.



The Villinger Opera House was set on fire in 1890 but was not heavily damaged and continued to operate into the early 1900s.

The Villinger Opera House was one of several theaters that hosted live entertainment through the years in Jerseyville. In the last half of the 1800s and the early 1900s, vaudeville acts and troupes of entertainers were not an uncommon sight in town. These live performances were often promoted in local newspapers. One 1911 ad promoted an upcoming “tent show” at the corner of State and Spruce streets which featured a 30-piece orchestra and “a troupe of educated Russian poodles.”

Another of Jerseyville's earliest theaters was the Jersey Theater, shown below. Its exact location and years of operation are unknown.



The Hippodrome Theatre, which advertised heavily in local papers in 1918, featured both films and live performances, including “the most colossal spectacle the world has ever seen,” *The Kaiser*, *The Beast of Berlin*. The movie was touted as: “The picture that will make your blood boil with rage. Bigger and better than *The Birth of a Nation*. Secured at an enormous expense and for a two day engagement to handle the crowds that will flock in from all corners of the county to see this wonderful offering. You simply can’t miss seeing this one and do justice to yourself.” Now that’s advertising!

But motion pictures were changing the face of entertainment.

According to a local newspaper article, the first “talkies” were shown in 1905 in the building located on the southwest corner of State and Exchange, where Rudolph’s Department Store was later located (below photo, far right building). Featured films included the “*The Perils of Pauline*.” The projector was operated by turning a crank, while a phonograph provided the sound. Because early films often jumped and flickered, they were commonly called “flicks.”



The Princess Theater opened in 1914 on South State in the north end of what now is the State Street Bar and Grill. The floor of the building had to be dropped 4 feet to accommodate the movie house. The front of the building was decorated with mirrors set upon marble bases.

In November 1921, S.E. Pirtle and Zed Reddish opened the Orpheum Theatre. Located on the northwest corner of State and Exchange, the theater could seat 630 and included a “modern ladies rest room” and a 48-inch exhaust fan, which meant movie goers could enjoy the theater even in the warmest summer months. In its early days, a four-piece orchestra entertained audiences before each movie. The theater caught fire in March 1934, and although a large audience was present, everyone escaped safely. The theater reopened and continued to operate for many years.

Pirtle also operated the Gem Theatre throughout the 1920s. When the business opened, a newspaper article stated, “Those who go to the theatre to talk or make lewd remarks will be invited out. People who attend a picture show should not be annoyed by some smart alec desiring to be conspicuous. Mr. Pirtle assures us that the pictures shall be clean and instructive and the best that can be secured.”

Another local theater, the Colonial, charged 25 cents admission, but two people could enter for the price of one if you had attended a show three nights in a row and presented your ticket stubs on the following evening.



The Jersey Theater was opened by Paul Horn in 1938. Many Jersey County residents have fond memories of seeing movies in the Jersey, which was located on South State where Fran and Marilyn's restaurant is now located. The one-screen theater operated until the early 1964, when the building was used as a Ben Franklin dime store.

Jersey County's newest theater, the Stadium, was opened November 9, 1949, by S.E. Pirtle (below photo). The first movie shown, John Loves Mary, starred Ronald Reagan in a supporting role and introduced actress Patricia Neal.

Announcing The  
Grand  
Opening  
OF THE NEW  
STADIUM  
THEATRE  
JERSEYVILLE, ILLINOIS  
The Finest Theatre In The Middle West  
Wednesday, November 9th  
The Stadium Theatre Features All Of The  
Newest Developments In Theatre Design & Equipment.

Admission to matinees at the Stadium was 40 cents for adults and 14 cents for children. An evening film cost 44 cents for adults and 14 cents for children. If you wanted to take your children to a Saturday and Sunday evening film, it cost you 6 extra cents per child.

Many of those who enjoyed the Stadium as kids or teens today enjoy watching movies at the Stadium with their children, and grandchildren. After 69 years, the Stadium remains a great place to catch the latest Hollywood releases at bargain prices. Now that's entertainment!