

WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

A series of tributes to hometown heroes who have made a difference.

Fountain Theater

Terre Haute's longest running small downtown cinema venue, the Fountain Theater opened at 422 Wabash Ave. on July 19, 1911.

The proprietor was Harry F. Prentice, the man who had brought the first "moving



The Fountain Theater at 422 Wabash Avenue circa 1933

picture theater" to the city in 1904 by opening The Nickledom at 721 Wabash Ave. Ousted from that location when Crawford Fairbanks decided to build the Tribune Building to house offices of the *Terre Haute Tribune*, Prentice exerted extreme effort to restyle the 1875 Kleiser Building, which previously had housed only retail stores. Jeweler Glen C. Brown and sheet music dealer Edwin T. Hulman were the prior occupants. Among other things, Prentice installed a stage and powerful fans to cool the interior. At the entrance, he placed an electric neon fountain in action, which attracted ample attention. The Fountain, according to Prentice's first ad, was "The New Home of the Old Nickledom." An attractive tile mosaic floor installed just inside the theater entrance read "Nickeldom," the common spelling of the word describing a "five cent theater." The Fountain offered "the most popular films" daily from 1 to 6 p.m. and 7 to 11 p.m.

On March 19, 1914, Prentice sold the theater to Frank J. Rembusch of Shelbyville, Ind., owner of three motion picture theaters in Indianapolis, two in Shelbyville and one in Lafayette. Rembusch hired Walter Beck as manager of the Fountain. Prentice was retained as projector operator. During the next three years several additional "five cent" cinema theaters opened in downtown Terre Haute, including The Savoy at 323 Wabash Ave., The Crescent at 681 Wabash Ave. and The Princess at 669 Wabash Ave. First-run motion picture theaters downtown in 1914 included the Grand Opera House at Seventh and Cherry streets, which concentrated on live productions, The Orpheum (formerly The Lyric) at 720-722 Wabash Ave., and The American at 817-819 Wabash Ave. Young's Garden Theater at 323 Ohio St. and The Varieties at 729 Wabash Ave. were the chief downtown vaudeville houses until The Hippodrome held its grand opening on Feb. 15, 1915. In 1924 new proprietor Paul K. Peters renamed his business in the Kleiser Building "The New Fountain Theater" following a major facelift.

Though management changed periodically, the Fountain Theater survived for more than four decades, graduating from silent films to talkies. In its later years it lured young teenagers on Saturday mornings with special film programs. When the Fountain closed in 1953, Harry's Variety Store—owned by the Hornstein family—was the initial tenant.

Architect Ben Orman recently renovated 422 Wabash Ave., reinstalling its original 1875 storefront windows and uncovering the unique Nickeldom mosaic laid by Prentice, Terre Haute's cinema pioneer, 95 years ago.



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