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*The  
Moving  
Picture  
Show*

A diary of  
100 years of  
moviegoing in  
Grapevine Texas



James Lawrence Groebe

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"The Moving Picture Show:  
A Diary of 100 Years of Moviegoing in Grapevine Texas"

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# *Introduction*

A few miles north of DFW International Airport, in historic old downtown Grapevine Texas, there stands a Palace.

As Palaces go, this one is simpler and smaller than the mansions of Europe. Its walls are stucco, not marble. It was built 80 years ago, not the Middle Ages. But like all good Palaces, it is a survivor with stories to tell, and even a ghost. Grapevine's Palace Theatre has lived through Hollywood's Golden Age and dark years when it was shuttered; attacks from hostile forces; fires and rebuildings; re-inventions by movie-mad dreamers and bottom-line businessmen. Through it all, the Palace Theatre has emerged a beloved jewel in the crown of this enthusiastic North Texas community.

It was hardly the town's first theatre. In the 120 years since moving images first flickered across a white sheet, Grapevine been home to nearly a dozen movie houses operated by an even larger variety of owners and names.

What with modern streaming videos, instant internet, infinite television, and other entertainment options a short drive down the highway, it's worth remembering that a weekly visit to the local movie house was America's main entertainment source for decades.

It's the old familiar story – town meets theatre, town falls in love with theatre, town leaves theatre for flashier amusements. But there's a happy ending: older and wiser, the town and movie theatre rediscover their love. This is Grapevine's version of that classic tale.

# 1900

In 1900, in between the towns of Dallas and Fort Worth, sat a whole lot of...nothing much. Nowhere much to go. Nothing much to do.

Except farming. The empty prairie land was decent enough for growing: cantaloupes, cotton, family plots. By 1900 a handful of isolated small villages had sprouted between the two towns - places like Estelle, Keller, Orbit, Coppell, Rawlins, Grand Prairie, Sowers, and Grapevine. A few farmers, a store or two, a church here and there. Nothing so nice as paved roads connected them.

Some lucky villages became whistle stops on train routes between bigger destinations. The "Cotton Belt Route" of the St. Louis Southwestern Railway laid tracks through Grapevine in 1888 after much lobbying from the townsfolk.

Trains made a massive difference to new towns like Grapevine, shuttling mail, supplies, crops, and people daily. Seven years after trains started passing through Grapevine, the town had grown robust enough to support a weekly newspaper, *The Grapevine Sun*.

Still, in 1900 the town was small and unincorporated and so didn't receive a separate census count.



*The Grapevine Sun*  
June 17 1898

# 1901

On the back page of the August 10 issue of the *Sun* –



– right after the railroad timetable –

**RAILROAD TIME TABLE.**

**WEST BOUND,**

No. 1.....	5:32 A. M.
No. 2.....	5:31 P. M.

**EAST BOUND,**

No. 4.....	9:37 A. M.
No. 2.....	10:44 P. M.

J. A. MORRIS, Local Agent,

– the paper’s publisher J.E. Keeling printed the following:

There will be an entertainment at the Grapevine College to-night, Aug. 10th, at 8 o'clock. I am prepared to show Stereopticon work; and I am also prepared to show moving scenery. Come out and see the Battle of San Juan Hill and other moving scenery. Admission, adults 20 cents; children 10 cents. P. W. POWELL, Manager.

P. W. Powell was promising residents a new sensation: for the first time, *movies would be seen in Grapevine.*



*Edison's Vitascope operating in a big city music hall about 1897.*

In 1901, motion pictures were so new – not even 10 years old – people didn't yet agree on what to call them. "Moving scenery" in the form of Thomas Edison's Vitascope had been projected for Dallas audiences just four

years earlier in 1897. With no easy roads from Grapevine to Dallas, it's doubtful anyone in town had yet experienced anything like what Mr. Powell brought with him.

Grapevine College was no Dallas Opera House, but it was one of the town's older, larger buildings. Built southeast of downtown, the College operated as a private school under various



*Grapevine College, where townsfolk first saw motion pictures*

charters since 1869. Not a college as the word is used today, it mainly accepted paying students in middle and high school grades and typically had about 100 enrolled, including some boarders.

The advertisement in the *Sun* (for which Mr. Powell paid about 50 cents) hints at what those first moviegoers would have witnessed - a hodgepodge of still images ("stereopticon work") and movies to educate, excite, and

entertain the whole family. Powell's "moving scenery" would be the evening's highlight, particularly those scenes relating to the recently-concluded Spanish-American War.

When war was declared in Cuba in 1898, Thomas Edison's staff were able to shoot brief clips of soldiers and equipment being readied for battle. Cameras and film were both too delicate and bulky to film actual battles, so Edison hired the New Jersey National Guard to re-enact Teddy Roosevelt's charge of San Juan Hill in the woods outside his West Orange, New Jersey offices.



Frame from "Skirmish of Rough Riders", 1899 Edison film

Edison then sold the film footage, minute by minute, to showmen like P. W. Powell. The Edison Films catalog describes one of the actual motion pictures Mr. Powell screened that August night:

*Shielded by a thick bit of timber at a turn of the road stands a company of mounted men, awaiting the order to advance. In the foreground, left as the flotsam of battle, is a dead horse from the shelter of which two marksmen are picking off the enemy. Suddenly comes the command, "Forward," and the riders dash up the road, out of sight, leaving behind them a great cloud of dust and smoke. A detachment of infantry covers the advance, and volley repeatedly as they press forward. (75 feet. \$11.25. )*

To make sure no competing companies profited by duplicating his moving pictures, Thomas Edison made paper photographic prints of every single frame of his

films and sent them to the Library of Congress which allowed individual photos to be copyrighted. Thanks to his protective streak, 120 years after those 40-second scenes were filmed we can still watch the guns fire and horses gallop, and try to imagine how astonishing it must have been to be part of that 1901 audience, as ghostly black & white figures moved silently inside a magic beam of light.

SEPTEMBER 10

The next time we find a local movie screening announced in the *Sun*, the advertisement was equally enthusiastic.

It hardly mattered that the scenes were random.

Just the fact that pictures *moved* would have been thrilling enough.

# 1904

## Exhibition To-night.

A wonderful moving picture exhibition, illustrating the highest attainment in the art of photography, showing life-size views of life and motion, will be given at the schoolhouse to-night (Saturday.) The animated pictures will represent scenes from the large cities, bicycle parades, fancy dances, comic scenes, railway trains going at full speed, and other views full of fun, interest and excitement. Admission 20 and 15 cents.

However, a few weeks later, a third traveling entertainer had less success:

DECEMBER 3

*Prof. Woodson, the sleight-of-hand entertainer, gave an entertainment at Grapevine College last Thursday night to a good sized audience. He said his apparatus for moving pictures had not arrived, and consequently that part of the show was omitted...*

More common than moving pictures at this point were still images compiled into “magic lantern” slide shows. Three-inch glass slides could take viewers on detailed (but static) trips to faraway lands or past eras. Engravings and posed photographs depicting famous scenes from the Bible were considered especially suitable for family viewing. A biblical lecturer presented lantern slides at Grapevine College in 1904, and the nearby community of Dove watched a lantern show at their schoolhouse in 1905.

## 1906

For excitement, moving pictures beat lantern slides any day. A 1906 ad for another traveling exhibition, “Burkard’s Lifeorama” which passed through town in November, promised thrills a-plenty.

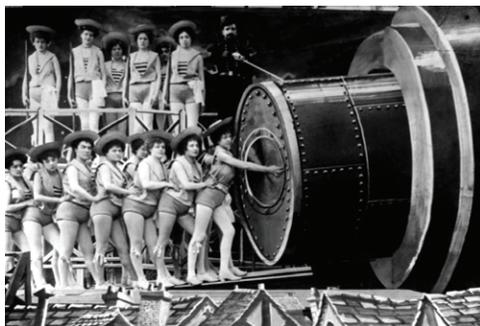
Still unsure what to call the young medium, the audience was promised

“Life-motion Pictures” just like patrons in large cities could see. Mr. Burkard’s program was a random mix of documentary subjects – scenes taken after the 1903 San Francisco earthquake and the 1903 fire at Chicago’s Iroquois Theatre which killed over 600 people, but also by short fictional stories like **The Fisherman’s Return** and **A Trip to the Moon**. The latter was already a “box office success” and would have been the high point of the show.



*The Grapevine Sun, November 24 1906*

George Melies, a former magician, combined stage tricks and cinematic special effects to film his 10 minute fantasy **A Trip to the Moon**. Although Melies and his movie were French, that was of no importance since it was a silent film. In fact, the comely French chorus girls who danced onto the screen to help launch the rocket probably assured a positive reception among certain audience members.



Scenes from *A Trip to the Moon*, 1903



**A Trip to the Moon** was both pirated and imitated, and (recently restored with the hand-tinting that was added to some original prints) still retains a stagy charm for modern audiences.

What did the audience think in 1906? The *Sun* rarely published event reviews. However, 18 months later in Mesquite, Texas, another "Lifiorama" went over poorly:

*The Lifiorama — improved magic lantern — pictures were very good but Mesquite has passed the magic lantern stage... (The) moving pictures were so dim and "jerky" that they were no good at all.*

*The Texas Mesquiter, June 5, 1908*

Traveling shows like Burkard's were always moving on to another town - sometimes with good reason.

# 1907

NOVEMBER 30

*Roland's Big Vaudeville Show and moving pictures, including the Thaw-White murder tragedy, illustrated songs, etc, gave exhibitions at the old public school building last Monday and Tuesday nights to crowded houses. The exhibitions were fine and everybody went away well pleased.*

Where Mr. Burkard had promised "strictly moral, refined, and high-class entertainment," Mr. Roland delivered sex and violence. Even in 1907 these were boffo box office.

Stanford White was a well-known architect when he was shot and killed by millionaire Harry Thaw on a New York public rooftop garden June 25, 1906 because Thaw's younger wife Evelyn Nesbitt had previously had a love affair with White. The ensuing scandalous court case was the first to be dubbed "The Trial of the Century."

Harry Thaw was declared not guilty by reason of insanity, while Evelyn Nesbitt eventually parlayed her notoriety as "the Girl on the Red Velvet Swing" into a modest and film career.



Frame enlargements from *The Unwritten Law*



Several companies raced to release films based on the lurid events, including **The Unwritten Law: A Thrilling Drama Based on the Thaw-White Tragedy**. The film was banned in Houston and elsewhere, but played Grapevine.

The “old public school” was the Grapevine College campus again, which had been converted the previous year to a true public school (and was soon to be replaced by a new brick building in the fall of 1908.)

# 1908

MAY 9

Dallas could now boast of a dozen primitive nickelodeon movie theatres, but Grapevine’s films still came only via traveling shows:

*As we go to press Friday evening and quite a number of our subscribers around town read the Sun Friday evening, we will state that the Crescent Amusement Co. gives an exhibition at Woodman Hall Friday night, presenting the latest novelties in moving pictures. Admission 10 and 15 cents.*

“Woodman Hall” (sic) was a two-story building on the northeast corner of Main and Franklin streets. Businesses occupied its first floor. The second story was for the *Woodmen of the World* fraternal benefit society, arranged as an open auditorium space for special events. This top floor burned in 1944 and was razed. The lower floor, much modified, now holds Tolbert’s Restaurant.



*In 1934, the Woodmen Hall building housed a self-service laundry on the first floor*

*Hamlyn's Olives Stock Company:*

*The above company visited our city and gave four performances beginning last Saturday night and ending Wednesday night... those who did not attend missed something good in the way of a high class comedy and high grade moving pictures. It is seldom that our town has the pleasure of attending as good a performance right at home as Hamlyn's and we hope they will favor us with another series of exhibitions in the future.*

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As the first decade of the 20th century ticked on to the next, Grapevine was a typical small Texas farm town – a few blocks of a Main Street with some side roads that ended in farmland. It wasn't yet big enough to need street numbers or even paved roads. After all, there were only five automobiles in town by the end of 1909. There were no bars and just one restaurant. Grapevine didn't compete with the nearby county seats of Dallas, Fort Worth, and Denton, which offered electric lighting, streetcars, opera houses, and storefront theatres showing movies every day except Sunday.

Still, there was a strong sense of civic pride to the town. Citizens wanted to be seen as "go-getters" keeping pace with the increased speed of the 20th century. Men, women, and children formed fraternal and civic organizations in surprising numbers – Woodmen of the World, International Order of Odd Fellows, Modern Brotherhood of America, Improved Order of Red Men, Masonic Lodge #288, the Order of Eastern Star, Rebekah Lodge Masons, the Grapevine Commercial Club, the Bay View Club and others. Grapevine could even boast of Boy

Scout Troop #7, founded in 1913 as one of the very earliest in the entire United States.

Most importantly, having carved out an existence on North Texas' Grape Vine prairie for 75 years, in 1907 Grapevine voted (53 for, 33 against) to incorporate and elect a mayor.

During the next few years town leaders were full of plans: lobbying for (and in some cases building their own) improvements -- a telephone switchboard system (1907), electric lighting (1910), an ice plant (1910), an (unsuccessful) attempt to lure interurban light rail to Dallas (1911). A few years later in 1923 it was even proposed that a lake and reservoir ought to be built nearby.

All this for a city that in 1910 had an official population of just 681.

The *Sun*, ever the civic booster, editorialized:

*More towns die for want of confidence on the part of business men and lack of public spirit than any other cause...Consequently, try to make a live, enterprising town out of the town in which you live. When you are working for your town you are accomplishing all the more for yourself.*

*October 10 1910*

The town was brimming with confidence, poised to grow and support new businesses. One of its residents would soon launch Grapevine's first moving picture theatre.



*An early Boy Scout of 1911*

Grapevine Texas' beloved Palace Theatre, built in 1940, is one of the town's jewels, home to regular film and musical events. But Grapevine's love affair with movies dates back to 1901 and spans a dozen different theatres. Generations of residents have been happily entertained at the Palace, the Mustang drive-in, the Grapevine Mills multiplex, and other screens now forgotten.

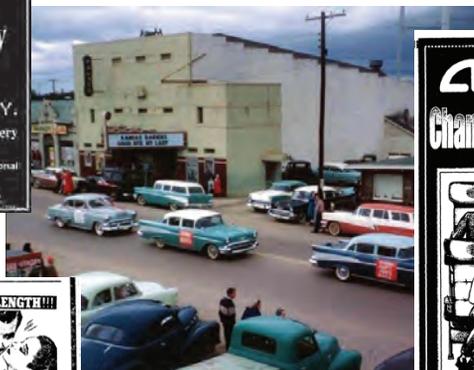
Even Grapevine, whose population rarely exceeded 1,000 for much of the 20th century, can reveal much about the history of the movies. Grapevine's theatres offer a close-up view of the ways we've watched film: from simple novelty to epic experience; from borrowed storefronts to fantastical hi-tech palaces; and starring a cast of local dreamers, shrewd businessmen, and giant corporations.

The moving picture show has faced a century of challenges: radio, television, wars, and even the highway system. The result of hundreds of hours of research, this story of the life, death, and rebirth of Grapevine's Palace Theatre and all the others is shared by communities across the USA.

*James Lawrence Groebe is a media historian, member of the Grapevine Historical Society, and former curator of the National Museum of Communications.*



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