

Silver Screens on the Prairie: An Illustrated History of Motion Picture Theatres in Manitoba
by Russ Gourluck
Winnipeg: Great Plains Publications, 2012, ISBN 9781926531212, 312 pp., \$29.95 paper.

Reviewed by Kenneth George Godwin

When I began doing research for a documentary about the history of Winnipeg movie theatres a while back, I was surprised to discover that during the century since the first theatres were built in the city, well over one hundred of them had come and gone. Downtown, there were the flagship Metropolitan and Capitol, plus quite a few somewhat less opulent houses. Then there were the numerous neighbourhood theatres which proliferated over the decades until, in the late '40s, there were almost fifty movie theatres operating in the city.

With the advent of television in the '50s, the inevitable decline began. Many of the neighbourhood theatres closed, and then more and more of the downtown venues. In the '70s, multiplexes made their first appearance and eventually, by the end of the '80s, virtually all the individual theatres had disappeared, leaving just the handful of suburban big box theatres we have now.

This is part of the story Russ Gourluck sets out to tell in his latest book, *Silver Screens on the Prairie: An Illustrated History of Motion Picture Theatres in Manitoba*. But he doesn't just focus on the city; he scoured the entire province for the stories of every theatre large and small which has operated at one time or another over the past hundred years. It's a large, unruly tale, and Gourluck leaves it up to the reader to piece much of it together as he accumulates a multiplicity of details from written and, more vitally, living sources.

Organized roughly chronologically, the book sketches in the major "movements" of film history in eight chapters that reflect significant developments in the social and technological evolution of the 20th century's primary form of entertainment, from its origins in sideshow attractions and vaudeville, through the golden age of silent film, the advent of sound, the upheavals of the Second World War, the arrival of television, the rise and fall of drive-ins and the coming of the multiplex. Within this loose framework, Gourluck does his best to detail every theatre that ever opened its doors in the province, no matter how small or brief its existence.

It's fascinating to discover just how much the movies were a "family business." The same names crop up repeatedly – the Aspers, who started with the Lyric in Minnedosa, went on to the Roxy in Neepawa, and ended up with the Deluxe on Winnipeg's North Main; the Miles family, which developed its own chain of theatres in Winnipeg; the Trillers, who owned multiple theatres in the city. Fathers, mothers, sons, brothers, cousins . . . the business seemed to get into the blood. Gourluck tells the story of the Rivalin family, whose patriarch founded the Lido in The Pas in 1930; the theatre has passed down from generation to generation – four to date – to the present day.

There are also stories of families created by the movies, men and women who met as employees and married, their children growing up in and around theatres.

This passion for the business makes it seem qualitatively different from other enterprises; those who built and ran movie theatres were creating more than a product. They were providing an experience to their customers that was rich in emotion. Whether in small towns or in city neighbourhoods, movie theatres were centres of social activity. In fact, this function was so important that in many small towns, when it became economically difficult for a private owner to keep the theatre running, the local cinema was often taken over by community groups, run by volunteers and supported by the town.

The richness of this social history is what Gourluck captures in his book. Inevitably, the amount of detail varies widely, with some theatres merely getting a name-check or a brief descriptive paragraph, while others are afforded multiple pages with vivid personal anecdotes. Not surprisingly, there is more to say as the story moves towards the latter part of the century, thanks to the greater availability of interviewees with personal memories of theatres, whether as owners, patrons or employees.

Russ Gourluck, a former teacher and school principal, has forged a second career with a series of books about local history. The previous four focused on places and institutions and their social importance – Eaton’s, Portage Avenue, *The Winnipeg Tribune*, and the North End. This new book is more diffuse. While the story of movie theatres is a 100-year epic of technological innovation which transformed the shape of society, the stories of individual theatres are much the same – birth in excitement, years of glory, then decline and decay or, in many cases, sudden death. The format of the book – something like a cross between a catalogue and a scrapbook rich in photographs and newspaper clippings – results in a certain amount of repetition; every theatre gets a mention and many have similar stories, with just the names of the owners and operators changing.

This is not, then, a book for reading from cover to cover, but rather one for dipping into, for triggering nostalgic reveries for something that was so vibrant, so important – at times even vital – for social life, which has now essentially disappeared. Movies were once *the* primary form of entertainment, a focal point for vast numbers of people who gathered and interacted around these sometimes grand, sometimes modest buildings where something magical and transformative would occur on a daily basis. Now we’re inundated with “content” on cable, on the Internet, in our homes with big-screen TVs and DVD and Blu-ray players. The movies today seem to be little more than just one more element in this busy, noisy entertainment landscape, at times little more than a promotional tool for something soon to be available on other platforms.

In gathering together the stories of Manitoba’s movie theatres, Russ Gourluck tells a story that is already receding into the past. Perhaps for the current generation this history will seem as strange and alien as rumours from a far-off country. But for those of us who experienced a part of it, the book may provoke fond memories tinged with a sense of loss. The author has provided a valuable service in gathering these stories now, before the memory fades.

Two quibbles, however, about this handsomely designed volume: first, as is too often the case today, the book went to press without a much needed final proofreading – the frequent typos are an annoying distraction; and second, while I understand the thinking behind giving the entire book a sepia tone for the nostalgic air of an old photo album, it has the unfortunate effect of softening much of the detail in the reproduced archival pictures, the originals of which are often breathtakingly sharp and revealing. 🍷

Kenneth George Godwin is a Winnipeg film editor and occasional director who writes about movies regularly on his blog: <http://www.cageyfilms.com/blog/>

Buy *Silver Screens on the Prairie* at McNally Robinson Booksellers:
<http://www.mcnallyrobinson.com/9781926531212/russ-gourluck/silver-screens-prairie?bInBKM=1#.UR0jN44rhzU>