The Cooper Theatre

Now that the Cooper Theatre has successfully raised funds for a new digital projector system, it is poised to turn a new page in its century long tradition of showing moving pictures in Griggs County. Let’ review this history. I gathered this information from older Couriers and the Cooperstown Centennial 1882 – 1982 book.

The building was first built in 1891 and was the Whidden Clothing Store. In 1912 the building was converted into a movie theatre and additionally presented live productions with an orchestra pit. The theatre was equipped with a Wurlitzer player piano used during the silent movies. On January 1, 1917 the 16 member Fargo College Glee Club sang.

In 1916 it was fiercely competing for movie goers with the Opera House in Cooperstown from August through December each theater with large advertising in the Courier for their programs. In January the Opera House seemed to throw in the towel and stopped advertising and the Strand Theatre reduced the size of its ads to about the size of the Theatre’s ads today.

The theater participated in the public life of Griggs County by having in May free showings for students during “play days”. And even today it offers free showings for children around Christmas time.

 In the twenties and thirties movies were shown four nights per week. In June of 1929 Cooperstown was chosen as the sole North American grand opening theater for the Norwegian language film, “Viking.”

The first talking pictures were shown May 22, 1930.

Through the twenties and thirties The Strand Theatre would show religious inspired movies while the bible camps and churches would be holding large revival meetings.

Before the spread of regional newspapers, radio and television up to and through the fifties, the Strand Theatre was an important source of national and international news especially during WWI and WWII. Each movie showing was accompanied by newsreels produced by the major news reporting organizations. The Strand Theatre presented Pathe newsreels. These newsreels would summarize and illustrate the major events of the last week. Many of these newsreels are now in the public domain and can be found online and can be viewed publicly without permission.

In 1978 Beverly and Orville Tranby for the Griggs County Historical Society made an exciting discovery. While looking through the Cooper Theatre Bev and Orv found rolled up under the stage the huge theatre curtain which hung on the stage. It was found undamaged in near perfect condition. It is brightly covered in vivid advertizing for local businesses. This curtain is now in the Griggs County museum and is a backdrop for the museum’s stage. It is truly wonderful and is one of the museum’s treasures.

Since 1972 the Cooper Theatre has been run as a non-profit corporation consisting of several county families. Thanks to the dedicated work of these hard-working volunteers the Theatre has been an important part of Griggs County cultural life. Now in the digital age our county can look forward to decades more of quality moving picture entertainment.