

## **“They’re Tearing Down My Childhood”**

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It wasn't that long ago that mom would drop me off at the Saturday afternoon baby-sitter. Unlike most of the fossils who subbed for mom and dad when it was their turn to pursue evening adult play, I always welcomed this sitter. And who wouldn't? The sitter was the cozy *Shady Oak* theater, the purveyor of Saturday afternoon delight for the adolescents of post-war Clayton (and Ladue and U. City).

A weekly fifty-cent allowance (as fair trade for household chores rendered!) stretched a long way in the halcyon days of the fabulous 50's. A two-bit ticket would get you previews of coming attractions of adult movies (go figure it), a cliff-hanger serial that seemed to have no ending featuring such heroes of virtue as Batman, Superman, and Commando Cody, about 10 cartoons with Mickey, Bugs, Woody, et. al., sometimes an "Our Gang" or "Laurel & Hardy" short thrown in, and "the main attraction." "The main attraction" was a grade B/C pedestrian double feature about cowboys and Indians, buccaneers, charioteers, gladiators, swashbucklers, crusaders, Vikings, other sundry conquerors, and sometimes even a trashy *film noir* crimster with some horse-faced curvaceous, bleached blond *femme fatale* (that today's social psychologists would find unfit for children). In short, an afternoon of pure *schlock*.

For another dime, you could marvel as the four-ounce Dixie paper cup (hopefully) dropped down into the coin-operated soda vending machine bay and magically filled with cold Dr. Pepper or some other sugar-laced soft drink. (Even then, soda at the movies was a rotten deal -- you could get a 6 oz bottle of pop for a nickel at your favorite confectionary, dime store, drug store, or gas station.) Popcorn was exploded fresh and butter cost an extra nickel. Nickel candy cost a nickel.

About once a year, you got in free in exchange for an old toy which was to be given to some underprivileged child. We weren't exactly sure what that meant, who they were, or where they resided (they weren't in Clayton) but didn't question it because the toys we donated were usually too babyish anyway.

Oh, yes. And the theater was advertised as "comfortably cool" by air conditioning. Not a big deal today. But in the sweltering St. Louis summers -- what a relief. (Let the records show definitively that summers were much hotter and humid before air conditioning became a household staple.)

And now for a senior moment diversion: Only one of our home's rooms had a window air conditioning unit. Of course, it was our parents' room, the same room that had the only telephone and only television. My brother and I used to schlep the mattress off our bed into mom and dad's room and sleep there to comfort our sweating bodies. This was summer's natural way of facilitating birth control. Now, back to our story.

As we neared junior high age (Wydown covered only 8th grade in those days), the *Shady Oak's* balcony provided a Friday night safe harbor for frightened little pubescent boys and girls with raging hormones. By today's mores, our sexcapades would be "G" rated. The management didn't seem to mind for at least we weren't talking and making a disturbance. And, we were out of there by 10:00PM, in time to walk over to the Parkmoor for a *Kingburger* and cherry coke with shaved ice. (Wouldn't it have made more sense to go to the *Richmond* theater and then to the *Parkmoor*? Answer: No balcony.)

Years passed. Prices rose. The balcony closed. Youth's tastes and ways changed. Kids became more mobile, less parochial, less chauvinistic about patronizing Clayton businesses, and certainly less nostalgic. The *Shady Oak* became an unprofitable molecule in a multimillion dollar multi-screened theater empire. Last August, the *Shady Oak's* 67 year old screen permanently dimmed.

There appears to be some local interest in at least preserving the building, albeit not as a movie theater. Perhaps in the future, some middle ager will have fond childhood memories of the likely nondescript enterprise that succeeds the *Shady Oak*. Listen closely. You can hear nostalgic echoes of some future kid-turned-grownup saying "*I'll always remember the 7-11, but I'm not sure why.*"