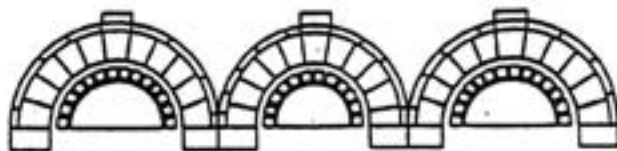


# Payne County Historical Review



*Stillwater Movie History –  
An Eyewitness Account*



*PAYNE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY*

Volume XXVI  
No. 2

FALL 2003

## Contents

Stillwater Movie History: An Eyewitness Account ..... <i>D. Earl Newsom</i>	3
Membership form .....	19

**Editor's note:** Most issues of the *Payne County Historical Review* include three or four articles. This special issue, though, is devoted to the photographs of Lawrence E. Johnson and the history of Stillwater movie theaters. We express our deep appreciation to D. Earl Newsom for writing the article and captions that accompany the photographs.

The *Payne County Historical Review*, P.O. Box 2262, Stillwater, OK 74076, is published semiannually by the Payne County Historical Society. It is distributed without additional charge to the members of the Payne County Historical Society. Single issues, when available, may be purchased at \$3.50 each.

The *Payne County Historical Review* welcomes readers' comments, news, or requests for information. Family histories, photographs, or maps are also welcome. No payment is made for articles published in the *Review*. For more information about the Payne County Historical Society, visit the Society's Web site at:

[www.cowboy.net/non-profit/pchs/](http://www.cowboy.net/non-profit/pchs/)



## Stillwater Movie History: An Eyewitness Account

by

D. Earl Newsom

Several documented histories have been written about Stillwater motion picture theaters, but one man was not only an eyewitness to an important era of the history but was actually a part of it.

For 16 years, Lawrence E. Johnson was associated with Stillwater theaters, most of the time as a projectionist, viewing movies through an opening in the projector's booth.

From 1943 until 1959, he was associated with the Campus, Mecca, Aggie, Leachman, and Moonlite theaters. He witnessed the opening of the Campus and Leachman. He operated the projector just before the fire that destroyed the Aggie theater in the early morning hours of January 18, 1948, and was present when it reopened with a new facade nearly a year later on December 21, 1948.

More than that, Johnson was a photography buff. He photographed many of the historical events involving theater history in the 1940s and 1950s. And when movie stars or celebrities visited Stillwater, he brought his camera, took their pictures, and often posed with them. Among the actors were Dale Robertson, Regis Toomey, William Lundigan, Ben Johnson, and Harry Carey, Jr. Some of Johnson's more interesting photographs are included with this article.

Johnson may hold another record. He may have attended more Stillwater schools than anyone in history. He came to Stillwater with his parents, Edward A. and Lola Johnson, in 1933 after his father decided to trade his farm in Custer City for a year's rent on a farm near Stillwater. He first attended little North Star school on the corner of what is now Lakeview and

---

D. Earl Newsom is a Stillwater author, and information in this article about early movie history is from his book *Stillwater — the Missing Links*.

Perkins Road. Then, because of changes in boundaries or his parents' moving, he attended Lincoln, Norwood, Jefferson, North High, and South High schools.

Lawrence became associated with Stillwater theaters at a time when the pioneer era was ending and the modern era was just underway.

As far as can be determined, Stillwater movie history began in 1907 when John O. Young and J. O. Slack opened a theater called the Pastime at 612 South Main. In 1910, Herbert Ricker, known largely as the city's first automobile dealer, purchased the Pastime, changed its name to the Gem, and moved it to 915 South Main. The city fire department purchased the theater from Ricker and renamed it the Fireboy. Proceeds were used to purchase fire-fighting equipment. The venture was short-lived.

Two other theaters, the Star and the Alamo, started in 1908. Both began in tents, but in 1914 the Alamo opened an elaborate theater at 914 South Main. It was Stillwater's first movie with an elegant interior. Although the Opera House on East Ninth Street was the first to present stage shows and other live entertainment, it did not begin showing movies until 1910.

A major development came in Stillwater movie history when the Camera theater opened in 1914 at 719 South Main. It was to remain for many years. Then in 1921 another important development came when the Garden theater opened across the street from the Camera. Its name was later changed to the Abbott and then to a very familiar name, the Mecca.

All of these were important, but the new era in Stillwater movie history came in 1926. The Leachman brothers, Claude and Oakley, decided that movies had a future in Stillwater. They joined the Griffith Amusement Co. and purchased a building under construction at 619-621 South Main. A special program on September 15, 1926, celebrated the opening of the Aggie theater. For the next 22 years it would be Stillwater's No. 1 entertainment center.

This was the beginning of the era in which Lawrence E. Johnson became an important part. He had nurtured a desire to be associated with movies since his teacher at North Star, Fay Dawson, had taken his entire primary class to the Camera to see *Alice in Wonderland*. His first job was at the Mecca while he was a senior at South High. Lanning J. Robertson hired him as a doorman afternoons with duties helping with concessions on weekends. Lawrence was fascinated by the projection apparatus and often visited the projection room during movies.

Noting his interest, Kenneth Denny, who was in charge of projections, helped Lawrence learn the operations. Within a short time, Leo J. Spencer, chief projectionist for all the local theaters, had Lawrence operating projectors at the Aggie, Mecca, Campus, and Moonlite theaters. He served as a projectionist longer than any individual during the Griffith years.

He remembers well the big fire that destroyed the Aggie early on Sunday, January 18, 1948. During the preceding evening, he had shown *Killer McCoy*, starring Mickey Rooney. After the last run, which ended about 11 p.m., he left the theater. Then Claude Leachman, the manager, made his usual last-minute check-up and locked the door at midnight. Not until the next day when Lawrence came to town and saw a huge crowd around the theater did he know about the fire.

From 1943 to 1959, Johnson viewed hundreds of movies. Which was the greatest of all? "No question about it," he said, "*Gone With the Wind*. There's never been another like it."

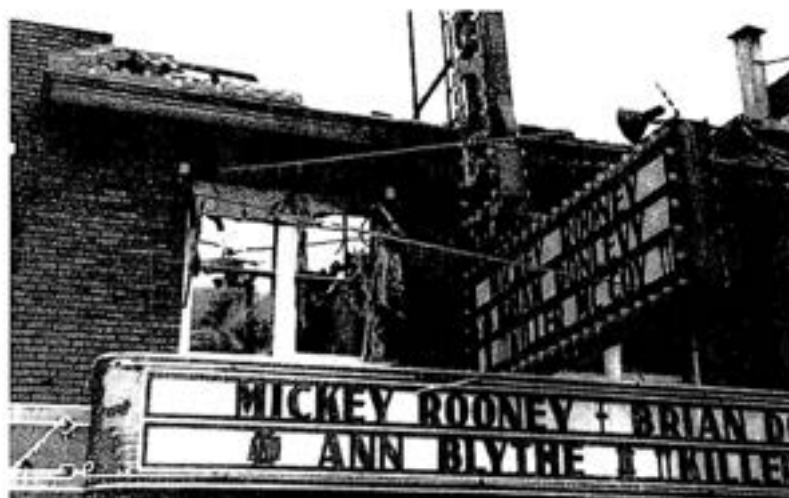
During this period, a number of young men, usually high school students, worked at the theaters as doormen, ushers, or even selling popcorn. Some later became prominent professional men. These include attorneys Winfrey Houston, Glenn Laughlin, and Richard Cleverdon. Among others was Forrest K. Boaz, who later became an advertising executive, and Bill Cleverdon, who became an assistant manager of a theater and later a Stillwater businessman.

Houston began selling popcorn at the Campus, then moved to the Aggie, where he became usher and then doorman, considered the most prestigious position for student workers. Sometimes he began work at the Mecca on Saturday mornings and worked until late at night as serials were run and rerun.

Some of Johnson's pictures taken after the fire and during visits by celebrities are among those on the following pages.



From 1926 until 1948, the Aggie was Stillwater's favorite entertainment center. This imposing marquee lasted until January 18, 1948, the date of the devastating fire. This photo was taken three weeks before the fire, which firemen called the worst in Stillwater since the Briggs Lumber Co. fire of 1927.



Lawrence Johnson had finished the last running of this Mickey Rooney-Ann Blythe movie on the Saturday night before the fire. This marked the end of an era for the Aggie.



The utter devastation of the Aggie fire is shown in this photo. Quick response by Stillwater firemen prevented damage to the Myatt Cafe and Chenoweth & Green Music Co. adjacent to the theater.



It took nearly a year after the fire for the Aggie to reopen with its new front. Its design was simpler and less ornamental. The Aggie was the fifth theater in Oklahoma to have sound motion pictures.





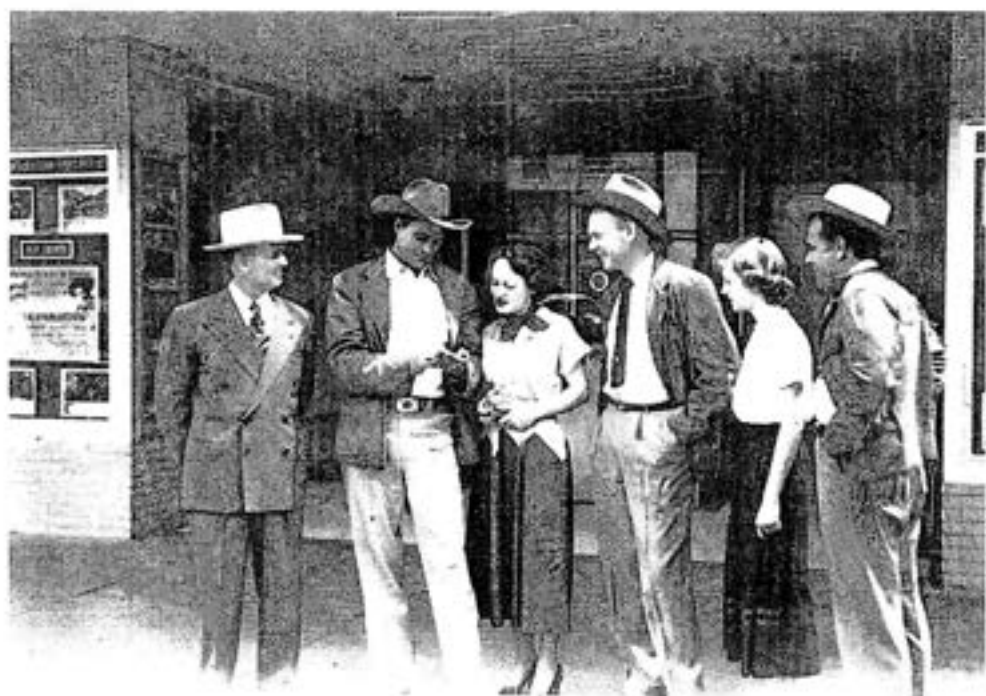
The young Dale Robertson came to the Aggie in February 1952 to promote his picture *Return of the Texan*. He ordered a glass of milk for dessert.



Young women flocked around handsome Dale Robertson to get autographs when he came to the Aggie in February 1952.



Three celebrities, Harry Carey, Jr., Stan Jones, and Ben Johnson, posed backstage for Lawrence Johnson when they came in April 1950 to promote their movie *Wagonmaster*.



While Claude Leachman, the theater manager looks on, Ben Johnson signs an autograph for Mrs. Leachman. To their right are actor Harry Carey, Jr., Claudette Leachman, and Stan Jones.

Formal Opening \_\_\_\_\_

The **AGGIE**

STILLWATER, OKLAHOMA

ANOTHER GRIFFITH-LEACHMAN THEATRE



TUESDAY, 6:00 P. M.  
DECEMBER 21, 1948

PREMIERE ATTRACTION— *A New Laugh Riot!*

“SOUTHERN YANKEE”

— Starring —

RED SKELTON — BRIAN DONLEVY

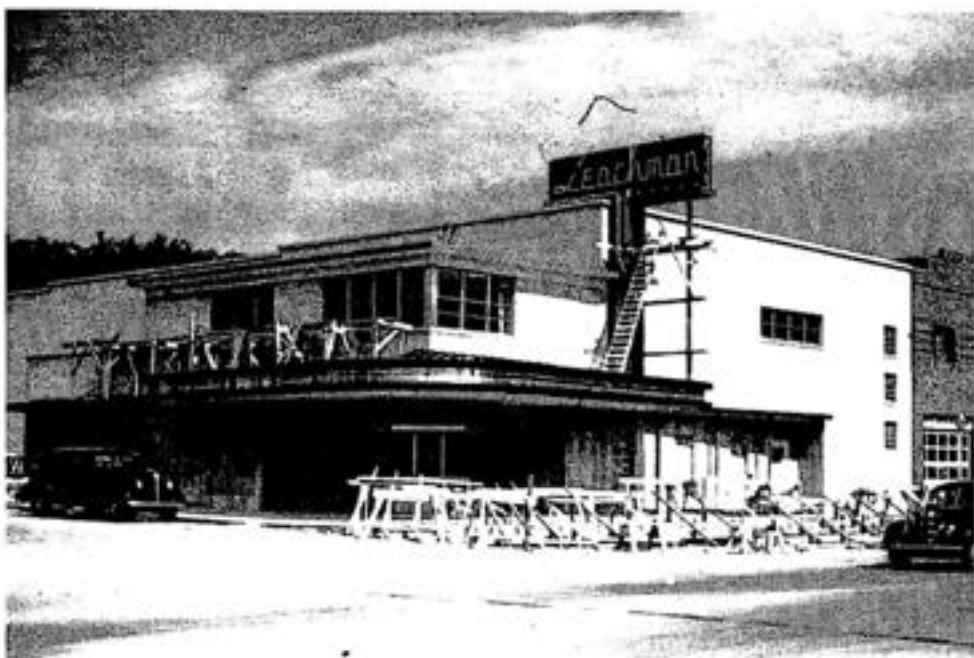
A Red Skelton comedy, *Southern Yankee*, was featured as the Aggie theater held a formal reopening nearly a year after the big fire. The marquee stands out against the clear, uncluttered background.



This photo, taken from in front of the Aggie after a big 1950 snow storm, is historic because it shows some well-known businesses of that era. Across the street on the corner is the Grand Hotel, once Stillwater's finest. Just south of it is Walter Creech's appliance store, and upstairs north of the Aggie is the office of Claude Bradshaw, well-known insurance agent.



Snow piled up more than a foot on Main Street after this 1950 storm. On the corner is the Van Horn Drug Store, a few doors down is the Tiger Drug Store, and beyond that is the snow-covered marquee of the Mecca theater. Street lights are still suspended from a wire in the center of Main.



Fortunately for Stillwater, the new Leachman theater was under construction shortly after the Aggie fire. This photo was taken in the spring of 1948.





A week before the opening night, the Leachman marquee was lighted up to proclaim the big event and its first feature, *The Bride Goes Wild*, with Van Johnson and June Allyson.



The young Lawrence Johnson is standing by the projector at the Leachman. He was one of the hosts on the opening night, Tuesday, June 23, 1948.

Formal Opening—

The **LEACHMAN**

||| STILLWATER, OKLAHOMA

A GRIFFITH-LEACHMAN THEATRE



||| TUESDAY, 7:00 P. M.

JUNE 22, 1948

||| PREMIERE ATTRACTION—

**"THE BRIDE GOES WILD"**

— Starring —

VAN JOHNSON — JUNE ALLYSON

This formal announcement invited citizens to the Leachman on opening night, and manager Claude Leachman said, "No city in America will have more comfortable theaters than Stillwater." The Leachman was closed in 1985.

## Payne County Historical Society

The Payne County Historical Society is organized in order to bring together people interested in history, especially the history of Payne County, Oklahoma. The Society's major function is to discover and collect any materials that may help to establish or illustrate the history of the area.

Membership in the Payne County Historical Society is open to anyone interested in the collection and preservation of Payne County history. All members receive copies of the *Payne County Historical Review* free. In addition, the Society sponsors informative meetings and historical outings several times a year.

-----

Yes, I want to be a member of the Payne County Historical Society. Enclosed is my check for:

- \$12.00 for Individual Membership
- \$17.00 for Family Membership
- \$20.00 for Institutional Membership
- \$100.00 for Life Membership

(Membership includes subscription to the *Payne County Historical Review*.)

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Mail to:

Payne County Historical Society  
P.O. Box 2262  
Stillwater, OK 74076

# **PAYNE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

## **Officers and Board Members**

### **Officers:**

President: Elvis Howell

Vice President: Barbara Dunn

Acting Treasurer: Elvis Howell

Acting Secretary: Adelia Hanson

Immediate Past President: Jim Showalter

### **Board of Directors:**

Bill Bryans

Carla Chlouber

Alice C. Cussner

Adelia Hanson

Eugene Hoyt

### **Payne County Historical Review**

Editor: Carla Chlouber



PAYNE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
P.O. Box 2262, Stillwater, OK 74076