

The first public exhibition of motion pictures projected on a screen was presented by Thomas A. Edison, America's hero inventor, in New York City, in April 1896. In a few years motion pictures, typically vignettes of amusing or dramatic events intended to excite or awe audiences, had become common place in music halls, arcades, theaters, and other amusement settings across the nation. Admission was usually five cents, so these early show houses were called "nickelodeons." These early silent novelty films, often accompanied by instrumental or vocal music, were not considered to be serious entertainment.

The first motion picture in Washburn was shown in the opera hall in March 1897, which included an on-rushing train, the Chicago fire department in action, and surf crashing on a shore. The Washburn Times reported that "the hall was crowded, and the audience was highly enthusiastic." A month later a second show with seventeen "views" was held at the opera hall, with tickets for adults costing 35 cents and 15 cents for children. In the fall of 1908 a moving picture company from Ashland offered "6,000 feet of high class moving pictures illustrated with songs by a well known vocalist" at the opera hall.

The motion picture busi-



ness was booming across the nation, with Washburn participating in its own small way. In November 1908 Washburn's first movie house, the Sunshine Theater, opened with "Fine Moving Pictures and Illustrated Songs" shown on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights. About a year later the Bijou Theatre opened in a building across from the Washburn Hotel. The opening announcement declared that "This is a Model place, is seated with Opera Chairs, has electric fans and all the conveniences." At the grand opening "4,000 feet of up-to-date Motion Pictures" were shown, with "Beautifully Illustrated Songs." Later "The Iron Worker," a tale of a good workman who finds himself fired as a result of the enmity of a fellow worker and of the superintendent who thinks that his fiancée is liking the young man. Everything turns out right in the end however. About 1913 the Gem Theater opened, complete with an "electric sign," which was "illuminated by eighty-four

lights and can be seen for a long distance." Movies shown at the Gem included "Orleans Coach," a magnificent three reel production;" "A Nation's Peril" . . . one of the best international pictures ever made and in the picture a steamship is actually blown up;" and "The Coming Of Columbus," The most stupendous and elaborate, historical production ever attempted by any motion picture company," which "Every American Citizen should see."

At first movies were considered by many to be an undesirable, even disreputable, form of entertainment, on a par with pool halls, music houses, and saloons. It was believed in some quarters that what was depicted by word or action in the movies would inflame the passions and prejudices of audiences. On at least two occasions the police shut down the Bijou Theater for showing movies on Sunday. Demands for movie censorship began with the early nickelodeon theaters, and movie censorship boards were established in many cities. Washburn established a "Mayor's Local Board of Censors," the membership of which included representatives of the major churches in the community. The board reviewed the German film "Passion," a historical drama about decadent court life in pre-revolutionary France, but

could not make up its collective mind if the film was good or bad. Facing opposition on all sides the board quickly faded into obscurity.

When people lost interest in the short novelty films, the emerging movie industry began to offer longer "feature" films (several reels) which told a story, starring actors and actresses, whom they had glamorized. Among those shown in Washburn were "The Streets of Seven Sins" with Doris Kenyon, "Every Woman's Husband" with Gloria Swanson, and Tom Mix in "Six Shooter Andy." So-called "screen epics" were also produced, the first of which was "Birth of a Nation," a sprawling historical drama portraying Civil War and reconstruction from the perspective of a southern and northern family. Special trains transported people from Washburn to Ashland to see the movie. The Times described it as "the greatest picture ever produced," and President Woodrow Wilson praised the film. But the highly prejudicial depiction of African-Americans in the film reinforced white social stereotypes.

As the quality of films and acting, and the stories they told, improved, opposition to movies faded, and by the Great War they claimed a large share of Washburn's entertainment scene.