

**“A GOOD SHOW TOWN:” CENSORSHIP AND REFORM
IN DALLAS THEATERS, 1890 TO 1940.**

THESIS

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by

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The process of writing a thesis is easily one of the most arduous and difficult tasks put before me in my scholastic career. The many ups and downs, successes and failures associated with this undertaking are too great to enumerate here. I wish simply to thank those who helped make this thesis possible. Foremost, I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Gary Hartman, Dr. Gregg Andrews, and Dr. Dwight Watson, for their patience in editing the many drafts of this thesis and for the valuable insight they provided along the way. The assistants at the Center for American History, the Albert B. Alkek Library, the Perry Castañeda Library, the Harry Ransom Center, and the Dallas Public Library were invaluable to me in researching this thesis and, in particular, with helping me scroll through year after year of microfilmed newspaper records. In the many hours spent writing and editing this thesis I was comforted only through the support of my family, friends, and colleagues. Their constant reinforcement and much-needed distractions were invaluable to me, and I will cherish them always. In reflecting on my abilities as a writer, I am reminded of some constructive criticism given to me by James McWilliams for an assignment done as an undergraduate, saying in essence that I have a lot of great ideas, but lack a cohesive argument, or in his words “lots of trees, just no forest.” Hopefully this thesis will present a “forest” for the reader and guide

further research into the rich history of theater in Dallas, Texas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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ABSTRACT

“A GOOD SHOW TOWN:” CENSORSHIP AND REFORM IN DALLAS THEATERS, 1890 TO 1940.

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SUPERVISING PROFESSOR: GARY HARTMAN

This thesis chronicles the censorship and reform of theaters in Dallas, Texas from 1890 to 1930 by southern progressives struggling to cope with the rapid onslaught of modernization and urbanization. Starting in the 1890s, reformers condemned theaters known as variety theaters for their permission of alcohol, gambling, supposed prostitution, and violence. By the turn of the century, after variety theaters were removed from Dallas and elsewhere, vaudeville theaters opened their doors to Dallas theatergoers. Despite being recognized by most as offering more family-oriented entertainment, vaudeville theaters such as the Majestic Theater were

criticized for their policy of allowing performances on Sunday. This debate continued for well over a decade, and caused great turmoil for theater owners and their employees, who were fined and even incarcerated for offering amusements on Sundays. By the 1920s, the Sunday show controversy faded into irrelevance as the community openly accepted the practice. A new threat emerged with the rise of motion pictures, however. Reformers shifted their attention toward the supposedly degenerative effects that motion pictures and plays had on the youth of Dallas, and created a local Censorship Board to regulate the quality of entertainment viewed in Dallas theaters. Though this body did censor and even ban many performances, the popularity and acceptance of theatrical entertainment was simply too great a force to be restrained, and the Censorship Board was abolished in 1929 as a result. Censorship efforts in the 1930s were few and far between, and the efforts at censorship and reform ceased to be a viable option for reformers.

INTRODUCTION

At the height of what is often termed the Progressive Era (roughly 1900 to 1920) the theater became a battleground for social reformers and their opponents in cities throughout the South. In Dallas, reform efforts directed towards the theater actually began during the 1890s and grew considerably in the following decades, as the theater industry entered into one of its most successful eras. Not unlike other cities, the theater represented the pinnacle of Dallas's cultural progress by bringing in nationally renowned entertainers and films, and by presenting a wide spectrum of entertainment to audiences, particularly through variety shows, vaudeville, and motion pictures. For many progressive reformers, however, the theater represented a corrupting force in an already rapidly modernizing and increasingly decadent world. Therefore, it is no surprise that one of the most popular and modern forms of entertainment available, the theater, encountered some of the harshest criticism from reformers.¹ This thesis will chronicle the emergence of late nineteenth and early

¹ Dewey Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983); William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Jack Temple Kirby, *Darkness at the Dawn: Race and Reform in the Progressive South* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company), 1972; Eric Foner, *The New American History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997). Most historians of progressivism in the South provide general discussions of the movement on a state-by-state basis. They note that southern progressivism was unique because of such issues as race and efforts to disenfranchise certain voters. Historian Dewey Grantham notes the distinct nature of progressivism in the South and categorizes reforms into social control, social justice, and social efficiency. Social control entailed efforts such as prohibition, disenfranchisement, segregation, prison reform, and antimonopolism. Social justice revolved around the restriction of child labor and the promotion of public education. The third category attempted to reform southern agriculture and municipal reform. Although each of these categories held distinct characteristics, the motives of reformers were varied and overlapping, and any one reform could fall under all three categories. The

twentieth century social reforms in Dallas as they relate to one of the city's most important social institutions, the theater. Chapter One addresses the closure of variety theaters by reformers due to the alleged presence of alcohol, violence, gambling, and prostitution, and contrasts this image with that of the contemporaneous opera houses in Dallas. Chapter Two analyzes the reform campaign directed at enforcing the Sunday or "blue" laws of the early twentieth century, which affected all theaters and erupted into a contentious debate in the local press. Chapter Three discusses the creation of a local Censorship Board and notes the effectiveness of the body in censoring numerous films and plays throughout the first half of the twentieth century. In each instance, reformers may have had good intentions, but the methods in which they sought to better society were often outmoded and ineffective for the modern world.²

The history of Dallas during the Progressive Era is well documented. Perhaps

central point to make here is that southern progressivism could and did affect all areas of life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even a seemingly unrelated institution such as the theater suffered the consequences of these reform efforts.

² Jackson Davis, "A History of Professional Theater in Dallas, Texas, 1920-1930." Ph.D. Dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1962; William Stowe, "Vaudeville at the Majestic Theater of Dallas, 1905-1910," M.A. Thesis, Southern Methodist University, 1972; Phillip Winston Sewell, "A History of the Interstate Theaters, 1905-1951," M.A. Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1996. A more in-depth investigation of Dallas theaters is needed, because previous works on the subject are limited to two masters theses and a doctoral dissertation. The earliest, a PhD dissertation from 1962 by Jackson Davis, looks at the many theaters in Dallas during the 1920s. In spite of the comprehensive scope of the work, there is little discussion of earlier theaters, and issues such as censorship are given only brief consideration. The next work, a 1972 Masters Thesis by William Stowe, offers excellent insight into historical trends related to the Majestic Theater from 1905 to 1910. Even though Stowe provides an introduction into nineteenth century theater and attempts to give a more complete picture of Dallas venues, his study ends by 1910 and ignores perhaps the most popular period in vaudeville's history, the 1920s. Though brief in scope, Stowe's thesis is perhaps the best work on the subject, because it addresses issues that had a dramatic affect on theaters and audiences, the most relevant being the Majestic's violation of Sunday (or blue) laws at the start of the twentieth century. The third work on theater in Dallas by Phillip Winston Sewell discusses the monopoly held by the Interstate Theater Company (owners of the Majestic Theater) from 1905 to 1951. Sewell's thesis is concerned with the creation of a monopoly by the owners of the Majestic and does not touch on the subject of censorship or reform efforts. Most importantly, its author, Phillip Sewell, finds fault with the contention that people viewed theaters as important civic institutions. Although Sewell does not ignore the theaters' many contributions, he believes the "community service myth" was more a result of shrewd business practices by theater managers rather than because of an overarching desire to benefit the community.

the best and most comprehensive discussion is Patricia Everidge Hill's *Dallas: The Making of a Modern City*. Hill identifies two main contributors to the progressive ethos that sprang from the burgeoning middle class—the business elite and women's reform groups. Business leaders maintained power over local decision-making throughout the era, but through their sheer determination, women's groups also forced compromises over many important reform issues. A third group that Hill does not include, the religious clergy, also influenced policy making during the Progressive Era. Their involvement acted as a counterbalance to the enormous social and economic changes then occurring and influenced decisions in an attempt to return to an era before modernization began to take effect. These reformers mostly came from the middle class and initiated reforms based on a shared desire to improve their social environment. In spite of the different approaches of these reformers, no group was entirely separate from the other, and agreement on any number of issues could and often did occur.³

Other cities in Texas experienced a similar reform movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Reformers in every major city faced the difficult task of improving infrastructure and dealing with the tremendous impact of rapid urbanization and population growth. In Dallas, the population increased more than twenty fold during this era, from 10,358 in 1880 to 294,734 in 1940. This kind of growth necessitated improving sanitation and basic infrastructure, expanding social

³ For more on the history of Dallas, see: Patricia Everidge Hill, *Dallas: The Making of a Modern City* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996); Robert B. Fairbanks, *For the City as a Whole: Planning, Politics, and the Public Interest in Dallas, Texas, 1900-1965* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998); Elizabeth York Enstam, *Woman and the Creation of Urban Life: Dallas, Texas, 1843-1920* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998); and Darwin Payne, *Big D. Triumphs and Troubles of an American Supercity in the 20th century* (Dallas: Three Forks Press, 1994).

services, and, for many reformers, curbing Dallas's appetite for public vices, including alcohol and gambling. Partly because some theaters allowed such public vices, reformers began to focus their efforts on regulating theaters. By the twentieth century, reformers had successfully removed public vices from theaters, but they still had difficulty with the enforcement of Sunday laws at certain theaters, and more generally, with allegedly indecent performances. Reformers across the state, especially in other large cities such as Houston and San Antonio, also attempted to deal in a similar fashion with the perceived threat that theaters presented to their local community.⁴

In Dallas, certain business leaders became instrumental to progressivism because of their dedication to the modernization of the city for both pragmatic and altruistic reasons. They believed that modernization would help create a better city for people to live in, while also encouraging greater investment in the city. For many businessmen, modernization required such policies as the annexation of suburbs, the adoption of a commission form of government, and the creation of beautification projects, which would build parks, widen and pave streets, improve sanitation, and generally improve the quality of life for residents.

At times the efforts of business leaders to modernize Dallas also clashed with the interests of theater owners and employees. The business elite wielded substantial authority over local affairs, and, without a doubt, had significant influence over matters concerning the theater. The first major reforms of business leaders came in the 1890s, with the closure of those variety theaters that allowed such public vices as alcohol and gambling. Business owners in the immediate vicinity of the theater

⁴ Hill, *Making of a Modern City*, xxiii.

district successfully petitioned the City Council for the suspension of licenses for disruptive theaters. This reform campaign stemmed in part from a national consensus on variety theaters, which, by that time, had turned away from the male-oriented variety theater and toward the goal of providing a more wholesome experience for the family. However, a much greater impetus came from the religious segment of the Dallas community and from the arrival of the popular Methodist preacher, Sam Jones, who stirred up opposition to variety theaters in the city.

Despite ongoing conflicts, most theaters did enjoy good relations with local business leaders. Many of the most prominent members of the business community came out in support of the opening of theaters, such as when the Majestic Theater opened in 1905. Most businessmen understood quite well the entertainment and economic value of good theaters. Yet when the local religious clergy demanded the enforcement of blue laws, business leaders began to crack down on the Majestic and arrested several of its managers and employees for operating a place of amusement on Sunday. The clergy's demands resulted from their long-standing fears over an increasingly modern and secular society, and the perceived threat from amusements operating in direct competition with Dallas churches. The Sunday law controversy erupted in the local press time and time again and was not completely resolved until the open acceptance of Sunday shows in the 1920s.

Women's groups also contributed to the progressive ethos in spite of their lack of suffrage and basic political rights. Traditionally relegated to subordinate positions in politics, women became involved in various social groups considered to be within their "sphere" of influence. Since the late nineteenth century, these women's groups

“used traditional beliefs about women’s talents and interests to address family issues and aspects of the urban environment associated with juvenile delinquency, poverty, and illiteracy.” Specific examples of their work include the establishment of libraries, parks, the creation of a city beautification program, and many other social programs intended to improve the quality of life in Dallas. However, female reformers’ greatest influence on theater came as a result of their desire to have entertainment suitable for the city’s children. The most prominent women’s group involved in regulating local theaters was the Federation of Women’s Clubs, which overwhelmingly supported the reform of theaters during the Progressive Era.⁵

Largely because of the efforts of women’s reform groups during the early twentieth century, business leaders again became involved in reform efforts by creating a local Censorship Board designed to censor offensive plays or films being shown in Dallas. Evidence suggests that the Censorship Board did not become a powerful institution prior to the 1920s, when it finally began to play a major part in controlling entertainment in Dallas. No doubt the Board’s newly-acquired powers resulted from the popularity of the theater industry at the time, and, more importantly, the addition of Ethel Boyce as a local theater censor. First employed in 1917, Boyce would quickly consolidate her authority and vigorously lead censorship efforts throughout the decade until the abolition of the Censorship Board in 1929. Because her guidelines for censorship were often ambiguous, Boyce frustrated many theater owners by banning performances or films for what she considered indecency or lewdness. In the end, however, public opinion began to shift in favor of the theaters,

⁵ Hill, *Making of a Modern City*, 16. For more information on the Dallas Federation of Women’s Clubs see Enstam, *Women and the Creation of Urban Life*, 136-155.

especially since censorship often ironically heightened the public's interest in shows and brought an increase in attendance. Furthermore, by the 1930s, the reform movement consisted only of a few isolated incidents of censorship, which caused immediate public outcry over the censorship of the films from audiences. This signaled an important change, in which theaters had become so popular that reformers found themselves unable to force reforms on increasingly unwilling audiences.

As a whole, the reform movement's effect on local theaters was substantial. Due to their often hasty and even misguided decisions, reformers forever altered the nature of theatrical entertainment in Dallas. Reformers caused considerable controversy when they abruptly closed down variety theaters, enforced the Sunday statute to the fullest extent, and censored performances during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Each of these aspects of the movement to reform theater in Dallas will be addressed in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 1

The “Evils” of Variety Theater, 1890 to 1900.

Human freedom has been purchased at too great a price to be bartered away at the thunder of the sporadic reformer.¹

Although most historians agree that the Progressive Era did not truly begin until the twentieth century, the movement to close variety theaters due to their involvement with public vices was well underway by the 1890s. Many of these theaters allowed alcohol and gambling, and some experienced occasional incidents of violence. A number of variety theaters also hosted performances on Sunday, in direct violation of so-called Sunday or “blue” laws. In addition, reformers in Dallas were influenced by the negative public perception of variety theaters, and by external forces pushing for the removal of the theaters from the city. Due to these concerns, both real and imagined, every variety theater in Dallas was shut down by the summer of 1893 with little recourse for theater owners and their employees. This chapter will examine how and why variety theaters became the target for criticism from reformers and how southern progressives played such a central role in bringing about the removal of these theaters.

¹ Reverend Lawrence L. Cohen, Jr. of the Munger Place Methodist Church. *Dallas Morning News*, July 19, 1915.

Before investigating the role variety theaters played in Dallas society, it is necessary to examine another type of theater known as an opera house. Opera houses rarely encountered criticism or censorship from reformers mainly because they offered performances widely considered to be both wholesome and entertaining. The owners of opera houses also designed their shows and the theaters themselves to appeal to the middle and upper classes, although ostensibly anyone who could pay the price of admission was allowed to attend. The three main opera houses in Dallas during the nineteenth century were the Fields Opera House, the Craddock Opera House, and the Dallas Opera House. While each theater contributed substantially to the cultural and social history of Dallas, they rarely, if ever, were involved in any controversy with reformers. The one exception is the Craddock Opera House, which did become embroiled in an instance of censorship.

The Craddock Opera House drew the attention of the reform movement in part because the owner permitted the sale of alcohol, something many reformers considered to be directly linked to other “immoral” behavior. In addition, the Craddock came under scrutiny for at least one allegation of indecency on stage. Although there is no evidence directly connecting this particular incident and the availability of alcohol at the Craddock, the popular opera house was one of the few to ever become the target of harsh criticism from reformers during the nineteenth century.

Built in 1879, the Craddock Opera House, located at the Northwest corner of Austin and Main Streets, offered a variety of well-known talent from across the nation before it closed its doors in the early 1880s. The two-story building housed a saloon and wholesale liquor store on the first floor and the opera house on the second floor.² In late 1882, L. Craddock opened a storeroom under his opera house and sold wines and liquors by the bottle and gallon, in addition to cigars and champagne by the case. It is notable that in opening up his liquor establishment in the same building as his opera house, the supposedly refined theater flouted the established custom of offering entertainment free from alcohol or other public vices. Perhaps fearing criticism from reformers, Craddock made certain to emphasize that his storeroom would be a “great convenience to families who wish to purchase from good hands,” and that he provided everything sold in the store for family use. Such an appeal is not surprising, given the prominence of the temperance debate during the era. Craddock eventually moved full time into the liquor business, when he opened a beer bottling company obtained from the Anheuser-Busch Brewing Association in 1883.³

The Craddock Opera House is also unique in that reformers accused it of hosting a supposedly indecent performance. Aside from the occasional critical review of individual shows, this incident at the Craddock is the only known example of a performance being openly condemned by reformers at any of the Dallas-area opera houses in the nineteenth century. A women’s social organization known as the Ladies Sewing Circle initially criticized the theater for its allowance of indecent performers,

² *Dallas Morning News*, “Many Famous Players Have Held the Stage in Theaters of Dallas,” October 1, 1925.

³ *Dallas Herald*, May 2, 1883 and November 3, 1882 “Craddock’s New Enterprise.”

such as John Templeton in his performance of *Olivette*. In particular, the Sewing Circle condemned anyone “who would sit through a play in which the girls of the stage wore such scanty clothing and behaved in such an undignified manner.” The Sewing Circle then rallied support from the local clergy who, on the following Sunday, joined in rebuking the theater and all who attended the show. This attack on *Olivette* is similar to instances occurring in the twentieth century with vaudeville theaters. In fact, charges of sexual impropriety became some of the most frequent criticisms of performances at theaters and often resulted in outright censorship of a play or film.⁴

Unlike most opera houses, variety theaters frequently came under the scrutiny of reformers and were openly criticized for allegedly promoting public vices. The main complaints from reformers were that the theaters purportedly allowed indecent shows, violence, Sunday performances, and the serving of alcohol. In discussing their alleged indiscretions, a writer for the *Dallas Morning News* described the theaters as places only people of a “wild and tumultuous sort” frequented, and that the “primary purpose of most of these places was to serve drinks,” with the entertainment simply “thrown in as good measure.” Yet despite these characterizations, opera houses and variety theaters offered entertainment of a remarkably similar nature. The only distinction appears to be the notoriety of the particular performer or play, and not necessarily the type of entertainment offered. The very same author conceded that some of the most well-known and respected performers of the day, including brothers

⁴ *Dallas Morning News*, “Many Famous Players.” No records are available that indicate what happened as a result of the Ladies Sewing Circle and the clergy’s censorship efforts. Nonetheless, the fact that they did condemn the theater for its shows suggests the practice was more common in the nineteenth century than is reported in the local papers.

Bert and Johnny Swor, began their careers as blackface actors in Dallas variety theaters. After paying their dues as variety actors, the Swor brothers eventually became local favorites in the opera house circuit. The two achieved fame from their performances in the musical *The Wizard of Oz*, in addition to their standard repertoire of minstrel work. The Swor brothers, who frequently played Dallas theaters (including opera houses) well into the twentieth century, represent the remarkable similarities among actors and performances in both the variety theaters and opera houses.⁵

It is also important to remember that Dallas was not unique in terms of local attitudes toward popular entertainment. Other critics throughout the country frequently commented on the demise of wholesome family entertainment, including one author who remarked that variety theaters in the 1870s and 1880s existed at a time in theatrical history “when, in beer halls and for-men-only dives, roughhouse turns and afterpieces were smuttily ‘blued’ to amuse the tosspots, strumpets, dark-alley lads, and slummers who in those years made up variety audiences from Boston

⁵ *Dallas Morning News*, “Many Famous Players.” *Dallas Morning News*, July 21, 1929, Amusements Section, 4, as quoted in Jackson Davis “A History of Professional Theater in Dallas, Texas, 1920-1930,” 742. The similarities between minstrel and variety shows often were considerable. The Field’s Minstrels were one of the most popular minstrel acts in the country at the end of the century, and the troupe performed on three separate instances at the Dallas Opera House in October 1896 alone. In an advance notice appearing in the *Dallas Morning News*, the author notes both the quality of the performance and the changing nature of minstrels by the late nineteenth century. The predominant trend in minstrelsy by the end of the century was a reduction in the number of troupes touring the country, contrasted with an increase in the size of each minstrel show. The individual acts in the show increased through expanding from minstrelsy’s more traditional components and offering shows similar to variety acts. In describing the value of the show the article notes that, “The first part, so often marred by coarseness and vulgarity, is made a model entertainment by Al. Field, free from the taint of suggestive songs and gags and the blemish of risqué stories.” Apparent here is that theatrical and minstrel companies both needed to uphold standards of decency in order to remain successful with audiences and were remarkably similar in both form and content. *Dallas Morning News* “Amusements” October 28, 1896. For more information on the similarities between nineteenth-century theatrical pursuits, see Robert Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

to San Francisco.” Whether an accurate observation for all variety theaters or not, many reformers across the country including Dallas held such opinions and initiated extensive efforts to clean up these venues.⁶

One of the first individuals in the country to reform variety theaters, Tony Pastor of New York, became a tremendous influence on the theater industry throughout the United States. As the owner of several theaters by the 1870s and early 1880s, Pastor had a vast knowledge of the theater combined with a shrewd business acumen. After noticing that mostly young men and women unfit for “polite” society attended his theaters, Pastor decided to purge his shows of what he considered unrefined or indecent material. This allowed for a more wholesome environment while effectively doubling the number of patrons at his theaters by allowing women and families to attend. Due to Pastor’s success, theater owners across the nation soon followed his example. Largely credited as being the first to reform variety theaters, “the Puritan” as he was affectionately known, offered a wholesome outing fit for the entire family. In fact, Pastor’s influence on New York theaters led to the streamlining of acts and performers for the purpose of making greater profits and the ultimate adoption of a more polished form of entertainment known as vaudeville.⁷

Reformers also had major problems with variety theaters because of their selling of alcohol to patrons. One of variety theater’s critics, the well-known theater magnate Karl Hoblitzelle, remarked that Dallas variety theaters “enjoyed about the

⁶ Douglas Gilbert, *American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times*. (New York: Whittlesey House McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1940), 10.

⁷ Gilbert, *American Vaudeville*, 121. Vaudeville consisted of many of the same components of its earlier predecessors but made even greater appeals for refined, family entertainment, and included female star performers in its shows. For more information consult Robert Lewis, ed., *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) 315.

same public rating as a good saloon.” Despite Hoblitzelle’s condemnation of variety theaters for alcohol, he later became one of the most successful theater operators in Texas and was also involved in his own controversy over the showing of performances on Sundays. Nevertheless, his criticism applied to the owners of the variety theaters as well, since they “occupied questionable positions in the community...and had graduated out of the saloon or gambling business and the public looked at them askance.” Despite his apparent conflict of interest, Hoblitzelle’s sentiments are representative of many throughout Dallas and also highlight the connection between saloons and variety theaters in the nineteenth century.⁸

Efforts toward the prohibition of alcohol began at the same time variety theaters in Dallas were at their height of popularity. In 1887, the first attempt at prohibition came in the form of a proposed statewide amendment banning the sale and manufacture of intoxicating liquors. Following the state’s lead, Dallas voters rejected the amendment by an almost two to one margin. Prohibitionists kept the issue alive, however, by bringing it back up for a vote in 1888, 1903, and 1911. They finally succeeded in passing it as a local measure in 1917. Despite the initial failures of the prohibition movement in Dallas, the fact that reformers continued to gather momentum in support of prohibition foreshadowed their growing attacks on the serving of alcohol in variety theaters.⁹

The clergy ultimately became the most fervent proponents of prohibition in

⁸ John William Rogers, *The Lusty Texans of Dallas* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1960), 221. Reference is to Karl Hoblitzelle, who became very successful in owning vaudeville theaters in Dallas during the twentieth century, but who initially came to the city during the timeframe of this chapter.

⁹ James Scott Wright, “The Prohibition Campaign in Dallas County,” M.A. Thesis, 1.

the South. Sects such as the Baptists and Methodists led the fight for the prohibition of alcohol, and, consequently, the ultimate passage of prohibition as a constitutional amendment. Many clergymen, along with their congregations, viewed alcohol as a source of immorality and sought to rid society of this and other evils. For reformers, there was, as one historian describes, “‘a sense of social obligation’ as well as an impulse toward moral coercion among the supporters of prohibition in the South.” Yet the prohibitionists also became alarmed with other trends occurring in the rapidly expanding cities. The push for prohibition contributed to reform efforts in other areas, such as anti-gambling laws, Sunday closing laws, and campaigns against prostitution. Reformers eventually directed each of these concerns towards theaters in Dallas. Noting just who led these reforms, therefore, is vital to understanding why the reform movement gained ascendancy when it did, and also why the theater became a central part of their endeavors.¹⁰

Reformers also were concerned that actresses and girls who worked in the variety theaters were “considered by ‘polite society’ to be barely a step above the prostitutes” in the city.¹¹ Although there is no record of prostitution occurring at any of the variety theaters in Dallas, it is clear that many reformers certainly associated variety theaters with prostitution, even if this was not the case. Perhaps fueling this misperception was the fact that, by 1890, Dallas had become so overwhelmed with prostitution and other vices that it passed an ordinance making “a vagrant of any person who habitually resorts to any gambling-house or house of ill fame, punishable

¹⁰ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 173-174.

¹¹ Enstam, *Women and the Creation of Urban Life*, 37.

with a fine of not more than \$10 for each offense.” The local ordinance also charged disorderly houses with fines of \$200 and made a provision for “opium joints,” which also were scattered throughout the city. Even though this anti-prostitution law passed in 1890, the problems with prostitution and other public vices continued well into the twentieth century. Variety theaters, on the other hand, survived only to the mid-1890s, due largely to the intense scrutiny and criticism of moral reformers. It is difficult to ascertain exactly why reformers so vehemently attacked variety theaters while prostitution houses and the like continued to exist in the city, but surely the prominence and perhaps even popularity of variety theaters (carrying advertisements in local newspapers) factored into the equation and thus convinced reformers that the variety theater was a more direct threat to a broader segment of the general population.¹²

The 1890 ordinance also affected variety theaters in Dallas, because certain theaters offered various forms of gambling. If prostitution did not occur in the variety theaters, then gambling on the premises surely contributed to the campaign to close down the theaters. This attempt at social control occurred throughout the South during the Progressive Era. Historian Dewey Grantham notes that southern progressives, particularly the religious clergy, were “goaded into action by the flagrant violation of liquor and gambling laws.”¹³ In Texas, gambling and liquor reforms stemmed from the dominance of the Democratic Party in politics and the large population of southern Methodists and southern Baptists, who comprised some

¹² *Dallas Herald* July 4, 1890. Payne’s book *Big D: Dallas* indicates that efforts to combat prostitution in the city continued well into the twentieth century. In particular see pages 41-48.

¹³ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 175.

40% of the churchgoers in the state. Alwyn Barr explains that “The two major Protestant groups shared, with some variations, evangelical views in opposition to government involvement in broad social problems or religious issues, though they had fewer qualms about legal enforcement of individual morality on questions of gambling and drinking.” Acting as a lightning rod for progressive zeal, variety theaters, or rather vices associated with variety theaters, became one of the most frequent targets of reformers in the late nineteenth century.¹⁴

The performance of theatrical shows on Sunday also became a controversial issue with reformers, who were intent on enforcing the state Sunday laws at the local level. Dating back to the Civil War, legislators often left Sunday laws in Texas ambiguous in order to allow for necessary services. The first blue law of 1863 included certain exemptions for the running of steamboats, railways, those herding stock, and owners of hotels, livery stables, and restaurants. The regulation of household duties was not affected, but “works of necessity and charity” were exempted from the first blue law of 1863. This enactment did prohibit, however, horse races, the selling of liquor, the use of bowling alleys, billiards, and shooting competitions on Sundays. The first instance of restrictions being placed on theaters occurred in 1887, when the Twentieth Legislature amended the original statute to include places of public amusement, which by this time meant “circuses, theaters, variety theaters...and...dances at disorderly houses, low dives and places of like character.” The provision, which stipulated that a fine between \$20 and \$50 be imposed for each infraction, remained on the books throughout the early twentieth

¹⁴ Alwyn Barr, *Reconstruction to Reform* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 16.

century. Evidence suggests that one of the most popular black variety theaters in Dallas, the Black Elephant, allowed performances on Sunday. It is unknown whether other variety theaters offered Sunday shows, but this practice did not regularly occur at other theaters during the nineteenth century. If the Black Elephant alone gave performances on Sunday, then the likelihood of reformers condemning that theater for immoral behavior increased greatly.¹⁵

The exact nature of what took place in variety theaters in Dallas is difficult to know with absolute certainty since very few sources have survived. The earliest variety theaters in Dallas started off around Camp and Griffin streets in the 1870s and 1880s. By the late 1880s, some even directly competed with the opera houses, such as Thompson's Theater and the Black Elephant on Main and Commerce streets. Other variety theaters at the time included Frank Debeque's Theater, Joe Mills's Theater, Hanlin's Variety, Gus Woods's Theater, Andrews's Theater, and the Coliseum Theater. The two receiving the most attention from reformers appear to be Thompson's and the Black Elephant variety theaters.¹⁶

Thompson's Theater, founded by Johnny Thompson, was one of the first variety theaters in Dallas. Having come from Jefferson, Texas, in the 1870s, Thompson built his theater on Main Street, between Lamar and Austin streets. The theater became very popular for audiences seeking inexpensive entertainment. It did not operate without competition, however, as nearby opera houses also offered

¹⁵ *Dallas Morning News*, "Texas' Sunday Laws Historically Shown," July 19, 1915, 2. At least one article indicates that the Black Elephant did have at least one show on Sunday. *Dallas Morning News*, "Fooling With Monte," June 17, 1889. Although most opera houses did not offer Sunday shows, the *Dallas Herald* on February 13, 15, 1884 indicates that English actress Anna Eva Fay, who gave séances, did break with custom and offered a show on Sunday for Dallas audiences.

¹⁶ *Dallas Morning News*, "Many Famous Players."

popular entertainment, such as minstrel shows and touring comedians and musicians. Thompson's Theater proved to be the longest running variety theater in Dallas during the nineteenth century, having lasted until the closure of all variety theaters in 1893. In this time frame, however, the theater laid the groundwork for all other variety theaters in Dallas.¹⁷

Thompson's offered a traditional lineup of acts, featuring minstrels, specialties, farces, and dramatic troupes in its shows. One of the most recognizable names to appear at the variety theater was P.T. Barnum, arriving with his circus in October 1880. Barnum's circus performed in countless cities across the nation and proved tremendously popular for audiences. His importance to American theatrical and circus entertainment was profound. One author concludes that Barnum "more than any other individual...pioneered the techniques that made popular entertainment successful" and paved the way for minstrelsy's and also the circus's success in nineteenth-century America.¹⁸

Barnum's circus presented a variety of entertainers, including "Madame Dockrill in her act on 4-6 bareback horses, 'Zazel' in her terrific aerial dive or eagle swoop shot from an enormous cannon, the world's only living giraffe, a yoke of performing oxen, and a museum of 50,000 curiosities." Prior to the establishment of professional theaters, circuses and other traveling performers provided entertainment for many cities the size of Dallas, and both the professional theater and the circus offered a remarkably similar type of show over the years. The traveling circus also

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Robert Toll, *Blacking Up*, 18. For more information on P.T. Barnum consult Robert Toll, *On With the Show*, 46-47.

presented an opportunity for the owners of the variety theater to appeal to residents in the city, as the presumably wholesome entertainment attracted all who lived near by. The good reputation Thompson's Theater enjoyed with the community is further supported by the fact that the theater never encountered criticism from reformers for indecency, nor is there any record of criticism for Sunday shows or prostitution and gambling on its premises.¹⁹

Thompson did serve alcohol at his theater, however. In 1873, the theater advertised that it was "open every night" and offered its patrons "songs, dances, jigs, farces, etc.," and the "Best of wines and liquors always on hand." Considering the reformer's desire for the control of public vices, it is puzzling that Thompson's never openly encountered the same criticism directed at other variety theaters for providing alcohol to its customers. It seems that all variety theaters were, at least, tolerated within the community until the early 1890s, when reformers first began their campaign to close down these theaters in the city.²⁰

By the late 1880s, numerous black variety theaters also appeared in Dallas, and by the early twentieth century a thriving entertainment district became available to both black and white residents. For instance, in 1889 "a negro named Moore from Galveston" founded the Black Elephant, located on Commerce Street. This particular variety theater was the best-known black theater in Dallas during the nineteenth century. Although it catered primarily to the black community, many working-class whites, Hispanics, and other ethnic groups also frequented the theater. Lower income

¹⁹ *Dallas Herald*, October 3, 1880. In another instance, Thompson's brought on "the celebrated Irish piper," John Burke who played for several weeks on end. *Dallas Herald*, October 8, 1880.

²⁰ *Dallas Herald*, "Amusements" September 6, 1873.

whites, in particular, patronized black-owned theaters during special shows known as “midnight rambles,” which offered everyone in the city an opportunity to witness the many famous acts playing black theaters over the years. This practice continued throughout the era of Jim Crow segregation.²¹

Black theaters carried shows comparable to those of white-owned variety theaters, except that they used mostly black performers instead. Evidence of this can be found in an 1890 newspaper article stating that a “mulatto whom no one here knows except by the name of ‘Charley’ was shot through the heart...by G. W. Harrison, a negro variety actor, about 30 years old.” This reference not only indicates that black entertainers did perform at the Black Elephant, but it also alludes to the occasional violence that took place at the theater. There are several reported examples suggesting that violent behavior did, in fact, occur at the Black Elephant. In the two years the variety theater is known to have been in operation, there are three major instances of unlawful behavior reported in the newspapers. The instances of violence more than likely heightened the suspicions of reformers, but the theater’s allowance of public vices should be viewed as the principal reason for its closure. In order to better assess why reformers may have closed the Black Elephant, each known instance of unlawful activity occurring at the theater will be addressed in detail.²²

In the first example, the author is quite explicit in his retelling of a shooting at the Black Elephant. Of interest is the vivid detail the writer employs to discuss the

²¹ *Dallas Morning News*, “Colored Variety,” January 12, 1889, 8.

²² *Dallas Morning News*, “Shot Through the Heart,” February 8, 1890, 8. Municipal police reports that would perhaps be more objective in their accounts of the violence first begin in the 1930s and are therefore unavailable for this time period.

injuries suffered by the person shot, including the precise location of the bullet and how it entered the body, the type of gun used, and the reported involvement of another weapon. He also makes certain to mention the excessive gambling and alcohol, and that the theater has “some negroes as mean as the whisky.” This style of coverage was certainly never used with other theaters in the city, which indicates that, whether accurate or not, the Black Elephant had a reputation in the community for violence and unlawful behavior. Also notable with this particular incident is the indication that the Black Elephant had numerous forms of gambling, which included “craps, old sledge, billiards, faro, monte and most any other sort of a game a person could wish,” in addition to “whisky of the regular wagon-yard quality and beer that was stale and behind on ice.” The mention of such forms of gambling is of interest, because there is no available record of gambling in any of the other theaters in Dallas during the nineteenth century, and the association with alcohol is also important, because it became central to the reformers’ criticisms of variety theaters.²³

The next major report is from February 1890 and illustrates the rather unprofessional reporting, at least in terms of criminal activity, centered on the theater. Entitled “A Cowboy from Wayback,” the article describes a man from the “wild and wooly west” who “held the darkies at the Black Elephant variety theater in awe...by exhibiting the spurs on his feet and a pistol in his pocket and claiming to be an officer.” After the black patrons of the theater called upon an actual officer to arrest the imposter, the man drew his weapon, “but the officer got the drop on him, and at the end of a revolver brought the westerner to his senses and then lodged him in the

²³ *Dallas Morning News*, “Fooling With Monte,” June 17, 1889. Another report exists which simply declares that “two negroes endeavored to raise a riot in front of the Black Elephant Saturday night and wound up in the calaboose.” *Dallas Morning News*, “Local Notes,” August 19, 1889, 8.

calaboose [prison].” While this instance certainly does not create a favorable impression of the theater or its patrons, the racial epithets and highly-stylized writing indicates that the authors of these reports may have been biased in their opinions of the theater and its patrons, which more than likely contributed to the negative perception of the Black Elephant in the community.²⁴

The final incident describes how G.W. Harrison, a black actor, shot a mulatto by the name of Charley at the Black Elephant. Apparently the argument arose over a hat Harrison claimed to be his. Charley, who became angered over the accusation, threatened the actor with a knife. Harrison defended himself with a beer bottle, and “Tom Patterson, another negro, wrenched the knife from his [Charley’s] hand.” Following a brief break in the hostilities, Charley came after Harrison again in the evening, but this time Harrison “shot his antagonist through the heart, killing him instantly.” Eyewitnesses verified that the shooting was in self-defense. Instances of violence occurring at other theaters in Dallas (if they occurred at all) never received the sort of attention given to this variety theater. Due to the nature of race relations at the time, these reports more than likely reflect a bigoted perception of the black community and this black-owned and patronized theater in particular. The repeated mention of violence, gambling, and the availability of alcohol, even if they did occur at the Black Elephant, are given such treatment by local newspaper reporters that the image of the theater as somehow deviant had already become a foregone conclusion to many in the community. Therefore it is not surprising that, with these last two incidents in particular, the Black Elephant had reached a level of impropriety

²⁴ *Dallas Morning News*, “A Cowboy from Wayback,” February 2, 1890, 12.

unacceptable to the surrounding community, and several business owners located near the theater petitioned for its immediate closure.²⁵

Many in the community condemned the Black Elephant and other variety theaters as havens of disgraceful behavior, and the theater's close proximity to other businesses presumably only increased tensions between the two sides. During the summer of 1890, citizens in the immediate vicinity of the theater petitioned the Dallas City Council for the suspension of the owner's license, because they "deplored the existence and maintenance of such institutions as these variety theaters right under the nostrils of the people of our respectable neighborhood." The most notable critics of the Black Elephant, the owners of the St. George Hotel, led the crusade to board up the theater. In addition to the charge of disorderly conduct, one of the hotel owner's main assertions for indecency on the part of the performances held at the Black Elephant stemmed from the fact that "loud, vociferous, vulgar and indecent language had been uttered," and that "their rough and vulgar jokes...and their maudlin songs" shocked visitors coming to the city for the first time. In comparison to the instances of violent activity, these rather flaccid criticisms were probably less of a cause for the issuance of the petition by reformers. Yet such quotes are evidence of the values some reformers in Dallas associated with "respectable" entertainment.²⁶

In response, the owner of the Black Elephant, William Sanford, made a desperate appeal to renew his lease by signing his own petition pleading his case before the council. He implored the council to look to the fact that the charge of

²⁵ *Dallas Morning News*, "Shot Through the Heart," February 8, 1890, 8.

²⁶ *Dallas Times Herald*, "Council Meeting," July 7, 1890.

misconduct had not been sustained against him and that he had attempted to operate his business in a “quiet and legitimate” manner. At this point Sanford was acquitted of the charge of disorderly conduct at his theater because of a ruling by the City Court declaring he had to be “present in person before he could be punished under the charge.” Though he evaded the impending foreclosure temporarily, in due time the Black Elephant and all other variety theaters would be closed in the city by reformers.²⁷

Other variety theaters in Dallas soon experienced the same fate as that of the Black Elephant. In 1893, public opinion rallied against variety theaters as is evidenced by a grand jury report of the fourteenth district court in May of that year. The report actually had a much broader scope, as the grand jury’s duties entailed finding “the keepers and owners of gambling houses, houses of ill fame, their owners, public violators of the Sunday laws and saloons laws and all other offenses which our attention has been called.” The grand jury asserted that its main difficulty in issuing indictments against violators of these laws resulted from the lack of support they received from some of the city officers, and that city officials did not effectively enforce the saloon law in particular. As a result of their public image, variety theaters became invariably enmeshed in the controversy. The grand jury went on to state that even “the lowest dens of vice and corruption,” the variety theaters, operated on public streets and near churches, while underage boys often drank and gambled, and “lewd” women frequently congregated at the theaters.²⁸

²⁷ *Dallas Morning News*, “Dallas City Council,” July 6, 1890, 12. *Dallas Times Herald*, “Council Meeting,” July 7, 1890.

²⁸ *Dallas Morning News*, “The Grand Jury Report,” May 3, 1893, 8.

On May 24 1893, the City Council took up the issue and debated whether to completely remove variety theaters from the city. One member of the Council, a Dr. Cochran, sided with the variety theaters by arguing that removal could set an extraordinary precedent given that they had not disobeyed the city laws, and that other cities in Texas had yet to remove their variety theaters. He then questioned whether those in Dallas could stay out of the theaters. "Of course, myself and your honor would not visit such a place, but there are many men, old men, baldheaded men, who visit them." Leading the opposition to the theaters, a Dr. Briggs, countered by saying "Tell me in the name of high heaven what the variety theaters ever did to elevate and ennoble Dallas?" Dr. Briggs's "most vigorous language" convinced several other members of the Council, but a Mr. Kahn objected to the immediate closure of the theaters and instead argued for closure after the theaters' licenses had expired. Continuing with his defense of the theaters, Cochran countered that Briggs only had evidence of "one theater which he knows has inveigled one little girl," and he called for a committee of three to investigate the theaters and report back to the Council. In the end, Cochran's efforts were not convincing, and the Council suspended the licenses for all variety theaters in the city and ordered the Chief of Police to close up the theaters and arrest those in violation of the ordinance.²⁹

It appears, given the circumstantial evidence, that, by 1893, variety theaters had become a public nuisance to local business leaders and other residents of Dallas. On May 30, 1893, however, the City Council continued with its debate over variety theaters. One of the members who had originally opposed their removal, a Mr.

²⁹ *Dallas Morning News*, "Variety Theaters To Go," May 24, 1893, 8.

Kendall, continued with his defense of the theaters by saying, “I am the guardian of my own conscience, and I have the courage of my convictions. I do not want the city to get into a law suit just because Sam Jones happens to be in the city. I never knew of the gentleman (Dr. Briggs) having been thus struck.” Sam Jones was a well-known evangelist preacher who came to Dallas from May 24th to June 3rd and denounced the variety theaters and saloons in the city. His fiery oratorical style appealed to numerous Dallas residents, including, it appears, one of the chief opponents of variety theaters on the City Council, Dr. Briggs.³⁰

Sam Jones, along with several other prominent Methodist preachers including George Stuart, came to Dallas as part of their speaking tour across the South. Jones gave several sermons in his more than weeklong stay to audiences numbering in the thousands. His message was simple. A self-described prohibitionist, Jones’s purpose was to directly confront those who drank liquor, and purge the city of its sinners. The *Dallas Morning News* described his style in the following manner, “At one time he thunders forth law, wrath, judgment and hell...He hates sin with all the venom of a serpent. He loves, with a Christ-like love, the sinner.” The editorialist for the newspaper continued by denoting three types of people who did not admire Sam Jones—those who had yet to hear him, the formalists (or those opposed to his fire and brimstone message), and the chronic sinners, of which Jones urged to repent. The newspaper also succinctly captured his message to Dallas:

Let me see your tongue, Dallas. Your nose is red. Let me feel your pulse. You swallowed 250 kegs of beer in one day. Dallas, you have too many variety

³⁰ *Dallas Morning News*, “The Dallas City Council,” May 30, 1893.

actors, gamblers, saloonists, lewd women and dudes. As long as you have these in your house decent people will not visit you. Drive them out, Dallas.³¹

Sam Jones was very outspoken about other issues as well, including the many references towards black people made in his speeches. After a black man had put the not inconsiderable sum of \$4.50 in the collection plate, Jones remarked in a speech printed on May 26, 1893 “Don’t you wish you was a nigger, brother? I mean at meetin’, so you can be respectable. Some of you fellows over there worth \$20,000 and put in a nickel. Get some lampblack and try it. Get your skin the same color as your conscience.” Though objectionable to modern readers, Jones held the same beliefs as numerous others in the late nineteenth century, namely that blacks were supposedly a “weaker race” based on the concept of survival of the fittest. Consequently, he urged their removal, not to Africa (because of its impracticality), but to the furthest reaches of the American Southwest. He also went on record as saying “law and order, the protection of life and property, can only be maintained in the south by the supremacy of the white man and his domination over the inferior race.”³²

This instance with the collection plate also alludes to another possible reason

³¹ *Dallas Morning News*, “Sam Jones’ Opponents.” June 12, 1893. Indeed, local opinions of Sam Jones varied greatly from town to town. In Paris, Texas, an editorialist picked up on the debate. “Some indorse [sic] him and others cuss him. Some say he is a dandy and some swear he ought to be run out of town...while others say he is a double-barrel, breech loading, hammerless fraud that ought to be soaked in muriatic acid ten hours, fried in axle grease a week and then buried in a swamp. So here, as elsewhere, there are a variety of opinions about Brother Jones.” *Dallas Morning News*, “The Sam Jones Meeting,” October 9, 1893.

³² *Dallas Morning News*, “Sam Jones’ Opponents.” June 12, 1893. Jones had a habit of including racial epithets in his sermons. For more examples see *Dallas Morning News*, “Jones in Waco,” April 9, 1894. Jones outlined his views on the political situation of blacks in the *Dallas Morning News*, “Jones on Politics,” March 9, 1894.

Jones came to Dallas. Jones himself was forced to acknowledge “There are a few people here who have an idea that this meeting is running on the basis of the collections here. If you think that you are fools.” Because there were some 8,000 people on hand at that meeting in June alone, the potential revenues from such a visit could have been quite lucrative. Jones always insisted, however, that the money raised from the collections was used solely to pay expenses related to the cost of seating and lighting at the meetings. Even though Jones was widely praised during his stay in the city, the prevalence of the accusation that Jones somehow profited from these meetings, taken with his racially insensitive remarks, raises questions about his sincerity in reforming Dallas and his true motivations for denouncing variety theaters altogether.³³

Despite Jones’s apparent flaws in character, many in Dallas firmly believed in his message. So much so, in fact, that reformers almost immediately initiated steps to close down the remaining variety theaters in the city. For example, the City Council member Dr. Briggs, who was perhaps unduly influenced by Jones’s message, soon began leading efforts within the municipal government to shut down variety theaters. The possibility that Briggs and others were led less out of a genuine concern that the variety theaters posed a danger to the public, and more because they were swayed by the gripping sermons of an outsider who spent only ten days in Dallas, is very likely indeed. It is unclear whether Jones and his fiery sermons truly motivated people to become reformers, or if he simply served as a catalyst to further motivate those already becoming involved in the reform movement. What is evident is that reformers

³³ *Dallas Morning News*, “Sam Jones’ Opponents,” June 12, 1893. *Dallas Morning News*, “Jones’ Batteries,” April 16, 1894.

acted on their desires to remove public vices and almost immediately closed down the variety theaters in Dallas after Jones's visit.

Not surprisingly, the impact on local variety theaters was substantial. The three variety theaters still in existence at the time of the 1893 ordinance were the Andrews's Variety Theater, Thompson's Variety Theater, and Gus Woods's Variety Theater. At the Andrews's Variety, the girls working for the theater were arrested several times for violation of the ordinance, almost to the point of becoming a routine. A local newspaper noted that "after all the horrors of being arrested had worn off...One of them showed her appreciation of the kindness of the gentleman who went on her bond by standing flatfooted and kicking his hat off his head." The girls, and the variety theaters in which they worked, were committed to challenging the ordinance, even when it meant the occasional incarceration or fine.³⁴

Thompson's Variety Theater, which operated in Dallas for some nineteen years, also experienced impending closure because of the new ordinance. Its manager, W.J. Neimeyer, commented on his rather dire circumstance:

Here I am to-night with my house closed, my business stopped, and with a company of nearly thirty people on my hands. If they were determined to close us they should have given us an opportunity to have gotten out of the business. My house here has never caused any trouble, and none of my people are ever brought up in the city court. My license runs eleven months yet, and

³⁴ *Dallas Morning News*, "The Variety Theaters," June 12, 1893. Houston underwent a similar process with its variety theaters, and by June 1893 the variety theaters had won a small victory in which they successfully sought an injunction against a similar ordinance.

this house has run for nineteen years. I believe I was served with a notice which said my money for the license would be returned.³⁵

One of the girls who worked at Thompson's Variety Theater was asked what she thought of the situation, to which she replied, "I lay the whole blame on Sam Jones, and I don't believe he is good for anything except to go around the country stirring up people's feelings." Employees for the variety theaters were clearly united in their opposition to this new ordinance and believed the entire situation to be unjust, particularly because Sam Jones had such a disproportionate influence on reformers in Dallas. Although employees for the variety theaters continued their fight, the opposition remained firm and little recourse was left for those working for the theaters.³⁶

At Gus Woods's Variety Theater, the manager also reflected on what few options he had left: "I'm going to fight the case and if I am beaten of course all I can do will be to get out of town." The quickness in which variety theaters were closed in the city did not leave much, if any, time for their employees to seek employment elsewhere or for managers to even pay many of their employees for services rendered. The mostly middle-class reformers pushing for these laws acted out of a concern that public vices were a detriment to society. Yet the enforcement of such laws had the perhaps unintended consequence of depriving owners and employees working for the theaters of their primary source of income. The only option for the owners of variety theaters was to leave town or file a lawsuit against the city.

³⁵ *Dallas Morning News*, "Variety Theaters Closed," May 27, 1893.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

The owner of Andrews' Variety Theater, J.D. Andrews, filed an injunction against the city of Dallas to stop the closure of his and other variety theaters. The injunction was denied according to the district court because the city had full authority to enforce the variety theater ordinance according to its charter, which provided for the "power to prevent or suppress keepers of theatrical or other exhibits, shows and amusements." In this and other similar rulings, the variety theaters' main argument that the City Council did not have the authority to overrule existing state law was rejected. Thus, with all other legal options denied to theater owners, the last major obstacle for the removal of variety theaters from Dallas was complete.³⁷

The shutting down of variety theaters in Dallas during the late nineteenth century is part of a much larger reform movement occurring within the theatrical world. To a degree this stems from efforts initiated by Tony Pastor and others to change the nature of variety entertainment in America. A much greater impetus, however, resulted from the movement's goal of ridding society of various public vices, including alcohol, gambling, Sunday amusements, and supposed prostitution. With the closure of variety theaters throughout Dallas, local reformers completed one of their major goals in the nascent years of the progressive movement.

Yet other, more "respectable" theaters also came under attack from reformers, the most notable of which was the Craddock Opera House. The Craddock demonstrates that the supposedly more refined opera houses could also offer alcohol and indecent performances to their patrons. In this regard, variety theaters and opera houses had more similarities than differences. At the time, it was widely known that

³⁷ *Dallas Morning News*, "The Variety Theaters," June 13, 1893. For information on the results of the individual cases of theater owners, see *Dallas Morning News*, "Variety Theater Cases," July 9, 11, 16, 1893.

many local actors, such as the celebrated Bert and Johnny Swor, worked in both variety theaters and opera houses. In addition, theaters such as Thompson's Variety operated in Dallas for many years without encountering criticism from reformers. That this variety theater, which did serve alcohol, remained popular and unchallenged for approximately nineteen years illustrates that reformers at least tacitly accepted most variety theaters until the early 1890s.

Why Thompson's and other variety theaters continued to operate in Dallas while the Black Elephant was the first to be openly condemned and shut down is an interesting question. On the one hand, the Black Elephant was more than likely the first closed down because it offered alcohol and gambling, and was perceived as a threat to the surrounding community because of reported violent activity. While the availability of alcohol and gambling were the main focus for the removal of variety theaters at the time, the examples of violence at the Black Elephant surely contributed to its ultimate closure, and the owners of the St. George Hotel said as much in their petition to the City Council. On the other hand, the newspaper accounts of the theater reflect commonly-held assumptions of many whites toward blacks at the time, which unjustly charged them with idleness and a preference for violence and alcohol. What is apparent from these accounts is that many in Dallas, and even those reformers who came to the city such as Sam Jones, were prejudiced in their dealings with black businesses in the community and may have acted upon these biases when they closed down the theater. Without definitive evidence suggesting the exact reason for its closure, however, it is difficult to gauge just why the Black Elephant was closed down before other theaters.

Nevertheless, by the summer of 1893 reformers successfully removed all remaining variety theaters from Dallas. The conspicuous appearance of the widely popular Methodist preacher, Sam Jones, could very well have been the spark Dallas reformers needed to ignite the fire of public sentiment against variety theaters. If this is the case, then the removal of these theaters was a hasty and short-sighted decision by reformers, especially considering the tremendous financial and personal costs suffered by theater owners and their employees. No matter how reformers viewed variety theaters, their removal is representative of a larger movement in which both the reformers and theater owners clashed. The impetus for reform began with the desire of individuals to curb the excesses of a rapidly changing society and quickly turned into a full-fledged reform movement. By the turn of the century, Dallas underwent considerable change in virtually every aspect of society as it transitioned into a more modern city, a transition that invariably included the theater. Almost as if on cue, the start of the twentieth century heralded the dawn of a new era in theatrical entertainment supposedly more refined, wholesome, and designed for the entire family. This new form of entertainment would come to be known as vaudeville.

CHAPTER 2

The Enforcement of Sunday Laws, 1900 to 1920.

*Because ye have forgotten Jehovah and neglected his law, therefore is your root
rottenness and your blossom dust.*¹

With the arrival of vaudeville in Dallas by the turn of the century, many of the efforts at bringing more family-oriented entertainment to local theaters began to coalesce around the creation of the Majestic Theater in 1905. Reformers still struggled to improve Dallas society, as prohibition, the progressive movement, and attempts to reform the theater would still be well underway by World War I. One of the main areas of concern for social reformers, particularly the clergy, concerned theaters offering performances on Sundays in direct competition with church services. The enforcement of such ordinances had a marked impact on vaudeville and motion picture theaters, with many owners and employees being arrested and fined for simply providing shows on Sunday. This chapter will focus on the controversy surrounding Sunday shows at the Majestic Theater in the early twentieth century, and the resulting conflicts among theater owners and social reformers.

¹ *Dallas Morning News*, July 19, 1915. Rev. John B. Gonzales of the Central Congregational Church in reference to Sunday laws. Gonzales's quotation comes from Isaiah Chapter 5, Verse 24.

The establishment of the Majestic signaled the start of a new era in theatrical entertainment, and many of Dallas's best-known residents came out to attend the theater's opening night. Among the leading figures present were the Sanger Brothers (of the Sanger Brothers Department Store), Hugh Nugent Fitzgerald (editor of the *Dallas Times Herald*), and Alfred H. Belo (son of the long-time owner of the *Dallas Morning News*). The patronage of such figures in the community suggests that business leaders were eager to support the kind of entertainment the Majestic offered at the dawn of the new century. The premiere was a resounding success. Several of the acts reflected the theater's effort to present more refined entertainment, including a demonstration of liquid air conducted by Professor W. H. Van Dorn, followed by the "violin virtuoso" Miss Josephine Jacoby, along with many other vaudeville acts. Frank L. Irvine, who served as master of ceremonies, reminded the audience that the theater resided next to numerous churches, schools, the public library, and the Elks' Club, and that "with such neighbors the theater would have to be conducted on a very high plane." Clearly the Majestic would need to win the approval of many residents if it was to remain successful and avoid becoming a target of reformers.²

In addition to supposedly offering more sophisticated entertainment, the physical design of the Majestic also reinforced the image of a more refined venue. The interior and exterior of the three-story building reflected a certain European

² William Stowe, *Vaudeville at the Majestic Theater*, 25-27. Stowe's thesis only covers up to 1910, yet vaudeville at the Majestic remained popular well into the 1920s and the theater is still in existence today.

architectural elegance, from the terra cotta trim to the three square towers atop the theater. The décor inside the theater further heightened this sense of elegance. The lobby featured a richly colored Italian tile, a “lavishly decorated” foyer, walls “frescoed in Louis XVI style,” and the seats were upholstered in leather to provide the greatest possible comfort to audiences. This attempt at building more aesthetically appealing theaters was part of a larger nationwide campaign to modernize the theater industry. A more family-friendly environment also lessened the chance that reformers would interfere in a theater’s daily operations. The Majestic Theater epitomized this larger, national effort to elevate the status of vaudeville as a form of entertainment.³

The Majestic was one stop on a circuit of theaters owned and operated by the Interstate Amusement Company of St. Louis, Missouri. Created in 1905, the company’s stated goal was to bring “high-class vaudeville attractions” to the Southwest. To this end, it set up offices in Chicago and New York in order to facilitate the booking of acts. The Majestic quickly became the second and most popular stop on this southwestern circuit. However, before a show could be brought to Dallas, it was performed in Little Rock, Arkansas, where the Interstate Amusement Company “maintained a censor who judged each act in terms of respectability.” Once in Dallas, it became the duty of local managers to uphold the decorum of each show, which they accomplished through reviewing each act prior to the actual performance

³ *Dallas Times Herald*, October 30, 1905, as quoted in Stowe, “Vaudeville at the Majestic Theater of Dallas, 1905-1910,” 30-32.

and then by handing over censorship duties to the orchestra leader once the show began.⁴

The Interstate Amusement Company employed a series of safeguards to ensure the quality of each show. One such safeguard involved having scouting agents travel from theater to theater in order to rate up-and-coming talent for the various touring circuits. For the Majestic Theater from 1908 to 1911, the talent scout rated acts and designated them “good and big, very good, good, fair, and poor.” For instance on October 19, 1908, the scout C. Bloom, reviewed the performance of “Arcadia” and rated it “good and big” with the additional comment of “Big hit,” no doubt reflecting the audience’s enthusiasm for the show. By contrast, a censor gave “The Austins” a rating of “fair” on November 15, 1908, and “The A.B.C.D. Girls” a moderate rating of “good” on December 28, 1908. Ostensibly the purpose of scouting stemmed from the ever-present need for new talent, but the reports could also work in the other direction as well, since any acts that received unfavorable reactions from audiences usually did not play other shows. The scouting reports covered literally hundreds of performers playing the various theaters on a circuit and became essential for theater companies to stay abreast of the tastes of audiences. That such reports exist specifying how a performer fared from city to city is a good indication that theater owners firmly controlled which performers appeared in their theaters.

⁴ *Dallas Morning News*, June 3, 1905, as quoted in “Vaudeville at the Majestic Theater of Dallas, 1905-1910,” 21. “Vaudeville at the Majestic Theater of Dallas, 1905-1910,” 36. There were other regional circuits in operation at the time as well, such as the Orpheum, Loew, Proctor, Fox, Poli, and Pantages circuits. Several of these smaller circuits provided entertainment for Dallas vaudeville houses discussed in chapter three. The main circuit for Dallas, however, was run by Karl Hoblitzelle of the Interstate Amusement Company, which supplied shows for the Majestic Theater and other theaters throughout the region. *New York Times*, “Vaudeville: A System that Runs Seven Hundred Theatres,” March 12, 1927, x4.

Consequently, an integral part of censorship activities included the self-regulation of shows by theater companies and the removal of distasteful performers from theaters.⁵

Despite the efforts to censor indecent performances and the improvements in the physical aspects of the theater, the Majestic still met opposition from some local reformers. The theater, its managers, and even some of the performers all came under attack because of the venue's violation of Sunday laws. As previously mentioned, the state legislature enacted these regulations in the nineteenth century in order to prohibit certain businesses such as theaters from operating on Sundays. Yet in Dallas, as with many other cities in Texas, local officials rarely enforced the laws, except when certain reform groups pushed for their full execution. The issue became quite contentious among Dallas residents, reflecting the growing concern among some reformers over the increased modernization and secularization of the city.

During the 1890s, reformers increasingly called for stricter enforcement of Dallas's Sunday laws. However the mayor at the time, Mayor Connor, opposed such a move and actually expressed sympathy for those who would be unduly affected by the closing of certain businesses on Sundays. Reformers were particularly concerned with prohibiting saloons and other places which served alcohol from staying open on Sunday. Advocates for this position argued that bartenders actually wanted enforcement of the law, because it would allow them a day of rest. Mayor Connor acknowledged the validity of that argument, but questioned putting other workers, such as streetcar drivers, icemen, and newspaper boys, out of work for a day. The Mayor called for uniformity of action on the issue when he stated that "If there are

⁵ Interstate Theater Collection, "Scouting Reports of Vaudeville Acts, 1908-1911," Box 51, Dallas Public Library.

those who feel that there should be an absolute observance of the sabbath, let them suggest a uniform remedy that will apply to all alike, and then I am ready and willing to join.” Despite such appeals, greater enforcement of the state Sunday law would not come until the start of the next century.⁶

The challenges of enforcing Sunday laws in the early twentieth century is reflected in a 1906 report issued by Police Commissioner Harry L. Seay. This report sought to convince members of the City Charter Committee of the need to exclude saloons from residential districts in Dallas. However, Seay also briefly touched on the numerous violations of Sunday laws, and his report illustrates both the reformers’ mindset and also the degree of Sunday law violations in the city. The main argument for removing the saloons was that they might corrupt the youth of Dallas, or as Seay declared in more poetic terms “As children they play around its doors, as boys they become its patrons, and as men they frequently become its horrible examples.” As with many reformers, Seay sought to improve the social environment surrounding the individual in order to remedy the problem, which in this instance meant the removal of saloons from residential neighborhoods.⁷

Seay also directed his efforts toward the enforcement of Sunday laws, which adversely affected theaters in Dallas. According to his report, officers filed in the County Court some 646 violations of the Sunday laws from January 1, 1906, to November 12, 1906. Despite this high number of violations, Seay also confirmed that effective enforcement of the Sunday law did not first start until the new Chief of

⁶ *Dallas Morning News*, “The Dallas City Council,” June 28, 1893.

⁷ *Dallas Morning News*, “To Restrict Saloons,” November 18, 1906.

Police, Mr. Brandenburg, arrived in office. This assertion is further supported by Seay, who maintained that Brandenburg processed approximately 600 of the 646 after he arrived in office. Though not always directed toward theaters, this rise in the number of Sunday law indictments is important, because it indicates that Sunday law enforcement became more of a concern for social reformers at the beginning of the twentieth century. Even more significant, however, is the impact of this new enforcement of Sunday laws had on the management of theaters in Dallas, including the Majestic Theater.⁸

The first major instance of a Sunday law violation occurring at the Majestic Theater came in 1907. On Sunday, November 24th of that year, police arrested the Majestic's manager, B. S. Muckenfuss, along with ticket seller Miss Rosalie Muckenfuss, and several members of the orchestra and ushers at the theater for violating the state Sunday law. Officers initially came to the Majestic and arrested those at the matinee performance, and, after the theater employees had made bail, police returned for the evening performance to arrest them once more. It was at the packed evening performance that the audience demonstrated its displeasure with the arrests. As reporters noted "The presence of the officers was announced by hissing and the hiss was general when they were seen on the stage." Such incidents became more than mere distractions for the audience, however, as theaters and reformers frequently clashed over the following years.⁹

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Dallas Morning News*, November 25, "Make Arrests at Majestic," 1907.

Muckenfuss became visibly outraged at the arrest of his employees, but even more so with the arrest of the seventeen-year-old ticket seller, Rosalie Muckenfuss, a relative of the manager. A week after her arrest, Miss Muckenfuss sued both the Police Commissioner and the Chief of Police for \$10,000 each in the U.S. Circuit Court. The plaintiff claimed that she resided in Missouri and only came to Dallas temporarily. She also argued that she had been arrested ““without warrant and without probable cause and without being informed of the charge which was to be placed against her, if any.”” There is no mention of the ultimate result of the suit, but this incident is a clear indication that many of the Majestic’s employees were willing to fight back against the enforcement of Sunday laws.¹⁰

At the time of the arrests made at the Majestic, several actors working for the Interstate Amusement Company sought an injunction against the county officers in order to prevent the arrest of theater employees. Attorneys for the actors stated that their clients “were under contract to give a certain number of performances and that in placing them under arrest they were unable to carry out their contracts.” The attorneys indicated that on previous instances when the arrest of actors in Dallas took place, acquittal usually followed with the “courts holding that acting is not labor as intended by the Texas statutes prohibiting Sunday labor.” Despite these assertions, however, the District Court judge denied the injunction against the officers, holding that it should be a matter for the state courts to decide. This ruling would set the stage for more arrests and even greater controversy surrounding Sunday laws.¹¹

¹⁰ *Dallas Morning News*, “Damages for Arrests,” November 30, 1907, 3.

¹¹ *Dallas Morning News*, “Two Theater Cases,” November 24, 1907, 26.

In 1908, the new manager of the Majestic Theater, T. P. Finnegan, also became embroiled in the ongoing debate over blue laws. After Muckenfuss had been assessed the stiffest penalty for operating a place of amusement on a Sunday, Finnegan began his own controversial trial. Tensions mounted during the voir dire examination when the defense lawyer for Finnegan objected to a question posed by County Attorney Lewelling by arguing that “no honest man would ask such a question.” Lewelling responded by saying that the council for the defense was a “liar.” Following these verbal exchanges, the two sides advanced towards one another in a show of aggression, but the Deputy Sheriff quickly reigned in the two lawyers. The fact that the lawyers representing both sides of the debate almost came to blows over the affair is a good illustration of the heightened tensions surrounding the matter and shows that the issue was not just limited to those directly involved. Rather, the episode with the Majestic would boil over into the surrounding community and remain a matter of controversy for years to come.¹²

Finnegan continued his struggle against local reformers for quite some time. Approximately five years after the trial, he issued a statement in defense of Sunday shows and cited a recent popular referendum as evidence that the majority of Dallas residents accepted performances on Sundays. Although public opinion vacillated on the issue, the fact that a referendum held at the municipal level did favor Sunday performances is a good indication that reformers did not have the consistent support of most people in the community. Finnegan continued his plea by emphasizing that the Majestic opened its doors to the Censorship Board (discussed in chapter 3) at all

¹² *Dallas Morning News*, “T.P. Finnegan Case on Trial,” November 24, 1908, 3.

times, and that he would “eliminate anything that could be considered as demoralizing or degrading” from the shows. He further asserted that, if reformers deemed the shows acceptable on other days of the week, then they should be considered acceptable on Sundays, as well. Perhaps Finnegan’s most convincing argument, however, was that most residents worked on weekdays, and the only day available to them for recreation was Sunday. By depriving theatergoers of their only day for entertainment, advocates for blue laws not only prohibited an opportunity for leisure, but also severely limited the income of the theaters and its employees—a reality that Finnegan and other owners witnessed first-hand.¹³

The contest between reformers and the theaters did not end there, however, as the issue frequently resurfaced throughout the early twentieth century. In 1911, the ongoing legal battle bordered on the absurd when the State Court of Criminal Appeals, ruling on the case of Charles Oliver, a Majestic Theater employee, questioned whether a picture show offered the same features as a traditional theater. Answering in the affirmative, the ruling declared that simply because the performer did not physically perform in the theater for the motion picture show, it did not abrogate the fact that audiences still witnessed a performance. Giving the opinion of the majority of the court, Judge Harper provided the analogy of an American audience attending a French play, who, though not able to comprehend the dialogue, would still be viewing a theatrical performance. Such seemingly trivial debates

¹³ *Dallas Morning News*, “Picture Men’s Statement,” June 22, 1913, 3.

actually hint at the great efforts being made by decision makers about the role of public entertainment in modern society.¹⁴

The clergy proved to be the most actively concerned about the new role public amusements would play in society. Although instrumental throughout this era, the clergy became especially prominent in the censorship of theaters during the World War I era. In the summer of 1915, the issue once more erupted into the headlines because of the ongoing trials of P.G. Cameron, owner of the Crystal Theater, W.D. Nevills of the Washington, and C.W. Hartman, owner of the Garrick Theater. In all three cases, the Dallas Council of Churches became the main proponents for the enforcement of Sunday laws. George W. Achilles, an affiliate with the Council, brought the initial charges against the theater owners after he “obtained admission by purchasing a ticket” and noticed a “moving picture on the screen.”¹⁵

Despite such criticism by religious leaders, the clergy was by no means unified in its opposition to Sunday amusements, and most held differing viewpoints as to whether Sunday laws benefited society. Some clergy called for a universal sense of moral obligation, as expressed by Reverend George W. Fulcher of the Exposition Park Presbyterian Church. Fulcher acknowledged that, at its core, the issue was much more than simply a matter of law enforcement, but rather an issue of morality. According to Fulcher, the church’s intent should not be to arbitrarily take away theater on Sunday, but to uphold a higher ideal in character for everyone. In effect, the debate over blue laws became part of a larger struggle of spirituality over

¹⁴ *Dallas Morning News*, “Court Rules Against Sunday Picture Shows,” November 30, 1911.

¹⁵ *Dallas Morning News*, “Acquittal Verdict in Sunday Law Case,” July 22, 1915, 6.

materialism. For Fulcher, the issue revolved around a laxity in worship and spirituality by local citizens. If people did not attend church, then the goal of the churches should be to “accomplish as much as possible what worship aims at—an ideal in character.” Fulcher also admitted that the theater as an institution was not inherently evil, but he reminded citizens that it should be their obligation to uphold the sanctity of Sunday.¹⁶

Other clergymen opposed the opening of theaters on Sunday, but they also appealed to the community’s sense of civic and religious duty in upholding the laws of both country and God. For Reverend John B. Gonzales, of the Central Congregational Church, it became imperative that every person obey the divine law regarding the observance of the “Lord’s Day.” When a controversy erupted in which state and municipal laws appeared contradictory, as in this instance, it became the duty of each citizen to follow the law of God over the “law of public opinion, law of expediency, or the line of least resistance...For we do not argue that the old law, ‘thou shalt not kill! thou shalt not steal! thou shalt not lie! are not to be obeyed, then why this—thou shalt remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy?’” Gonzales’s fiery appeal to the observance of all laws, both religious and secular, shows precisely where the support for blue laws originated and where it drew its greatest support.¹⁷

Dr. Landon C. Moore, of the Law Enforcement Committee, also affiliated with the Dallas Council of Churches, took this concept a step further when he spoke of “Christian Citizenship.” For Moore, and no doubt many in the Council of

¹⁶ *Dallas Morning News*, “Sabbath Observance Topic in Churches,” July 19, 1915, 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Churches, it should be the responsibility of each citizen to act when the police or legislature failed to do their duty in enforcing the law. He provided the example of gambling to illustrate his point. When public officials were silent on the issue, it was, as he contends, the Christian citizen who initiated the campaign to make gambling a felony and to prohibit gambling from racetracks. As Moore argues, “All great moral reforms have come from the fact that we have had consecrated Christian citizens who were not afraid to act when our officials and our Legislature had failed to do their duty.” In this, the most extreme of the churches’ positions, it is quite evident that “Christian Citizenship” entailed combating the evils of modern society, even in extralegal circumstances.¹⁸

The justification for the enforcement of blue laws is much more difficult to pin down, however. A significant component of this reform effort came from the clergy’s intention of performing their civic and religious duty by ensuring the enforcement of Sunday laws. As clergymen, they no doubt dedicated themselves to instilling a higher sense of religious sentiment and preserving the moral sanctity of their flock. Yet a more compelling reason surely must have been what historian Richard Hofstadter called the “status revolution.” Many clergy and other “Mugwump Progressives” experienced a loss in social prestige that occurred “not because of economic deprivations but primarily because they were victims of an upheaval in status that took place in the United States during the closing decades of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth century.” The clergy became active participants in the progressive movement, because they lost standing as intellectual and religious leaders within the community as a result of the increased secularization of society

¹⁸ Ibid.

following the rapid modernization of America. Thus the efforts toward the reform of theaters and the implementation of Sunday laws occurred as a result of the decline in status the clergy experienced after the rapid growth of Dallas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁹

In spite of such calls for the enforcement of blue laws, not every clergyman opposed the theaters' operating on Sunday. For instance, Reverend Lawrence L. Cohen, Jr., of the Munger Place Methodist Church, urged the churches not to overreact in the matter. He rejected the notion that reforms could take place overnight, arguing that, "Human freedom has been purchased at too great a price to be bartered away at the thunder of the sporadic reformer." Cohen certainly did not reject all reforms. He did believe there were significant problems in modern society, such as the dangers associated with young women taking "automobile 'joy rides' on dark country roads." Nevertheless, he also believed there was intrinsic value in some films and theatrical performances, such as those that inspired a "lofty patriotism, thrill the soul with heroism and charge our minds with the vision of God and his goodness." Ultimately Cohen did not favor most films being shown in Dallas theaters per se, but instead called on his fellow clergymen to recognize the greater evils afflicting the modern world.²⁰

Did business leaders agree with the sentiments of the religious community? Although as a group they varied as much as everyone else on the issue, the opinions of Mayor Henry Lindsley represent many among the business elite. In a 1915

¹⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 135.

²⁰ *Dallas Morning News*, "Sabbath Observance Topic in Churches," July 19, 1915.

statement Lindsley makes it quite clear that “it is not the business of a part of the community to dictate to another part of a community that such other part may not participate in harmless amusement or recreation.” However, the Mayor also indicated that he would uphold all laws “of the Nation, the State and the city.” Similar to many in his position of authority, he did not oppose Sunday performances or the theater itself because of any moral concern, but rather stood for the enforcement of the law, and therefore left his decision for the courts to resolve. In his opinion, the Church as an institution should not determine whether Sunday recreation is acceptable or not, and he even considered its interference in the matter to “be one of the gravest mistakes in the history of Christian civilization.” Lindsley certainly had his misgivings about certain motion pictures shown in Dallas, but, much like T.P. Finnegan, the one-time owner of the Majestic Theater, he thought it absurd to only argue for proscription on Sunday and consider all other days of the week acceptable for recreation. If reformers considered a theatrical performance or motion picture tolerable on one day of the week, then why should they not on any other?²¹

To better understand the opinions of Dallas business leaders regarding theaters, it is helpful to consider a banquet in 1911 held for Karl Hoblitzelle, president of the Interstate Amusement Company. The banquet was intended to promote the establishment of a new Majestic Theater, which business leaders believed would be the envy of all other cities in Texas and therefore make Dallas an even “greater theater center than it is even today.” Hoblitzelle spoke of the need for a bigger and better theater in Dallas, acknowledging that Fort Worth and Houston had better

²¹ *Dallas Morning News*, “Sunday Picture Shows Indorsed,” July 13, 1915, 5.

theaters, which his company, coincidentally, had built. With the new Majestic he argued, Dallas would have the most prestigious theater in the state. The plans for a new theater came to fruition only after fire gutted the original Majestic in 1916 (a rather common occurrence for theaters at the time), and a new Majestic was built on Elm Street some years later in 1921.²²

Other business leaders at the meeting echoed Hoblitzelle's sentiments. For example, Dallas Mayor W. M. Holland stated that "Dallas has outgrown the Majestic Theater of today. The present house was all right in its day, but we feel now that we need and deserve something better." Ironically, the same Police Commissioner who earlier had sought the prohibition of saloons from residential neighborhoods and who had advocated the enforcement of Sunday laws, Harry L. Seay, also attended the meeting. His participation indicates that the lines between reformers and leaders in the community often became blurred, and that most residents sought an equitable solution to the theater situation, rather than simply removing all theaters from the city. Nevertheless, George B. Dealey, manager of the *Dallas Morning News*, also weighed in on the discussion and expressed why owners believed the Majestic was inadequate:

Individually, I think that the present Dallas Opera House and the Majestic Theater are too far out of town. We must get our theaters nearer the people. Frequently when leaving the opera house cars are jammed full of humanity,

²² *Dallas Morning News*, "Citizens Discuss New Theater Plans," November 29, 1911, 3. After the fire in 1916, shows were moved to the "old" opera house on St. Paul and Main streets. For more information on the fire at the Majestic see *Dallas Morning News*, "Many Famous Players Have Held the Stage in Theaters of Dallas," October 1, 1925.

until it is hard to find room at all. Then at the loop one has to wait for fifteen or twenty minutes before getting a car for home. We ought to have the theaters in more convenient places of Oak Cliff, North Dallas, South Dallas and East Dallas. Put them in the lower end of the city.²³

With such ongoing issues as the physical location of theaters and the continuing debate over Sunday performances, it is little wonder that business leaders sought a new direction for theatrical entertainment. This originated from the pragmatic need for wholesome yet still profitable theaters. During the controversy surrounding the Majestic's policy of Sunday shows, the business elite wanted theaters that would be acceptable to all within the community, particularly reformers. This did not occur until the building of larger and even more physically appealing theaters at the beginning of the 1920s.

Despite the Majestic's attempts to censor shows internally and to improve on the physical aspects of the theater, reformers still condemned the theater for its Sunday amusements. The personal and financial troubles experienced by employees and managers of the theater because of these reformers was substantial, yet for most of the Majestic's personnel, Sunday shows were necessary in order to compete with the many theaters being built during the early twentieth century. Sunday performances resulted from the practical need to entertain patrons on their only day off from work, even though this policy did directly challenge the local clergy's authority. In the end, the Majestic Theater was successful, and the community eventually accepted the policy of offering Sunday shows. Furthermore, because the

²³ Ibid.

Majestic faced the most opposition from reformers of any theater in Dallas during the early twentieth century, its ultimate victory in the Sunday show controversy is even more significant, and the popularity the theater still enjoys is a testament to the importance of the theater to residents of Dallas.

The clergy became the fiercest advocates of enforcement of Sunday laws, partly as a result of their loss of status within the community, and also because of their growing fears over the secularization of modern society. However, clergymen were not united in their views of the situation. Though most believed Sunday laws needed to be enforced, some realized that the issue had already been taken to extremes. As time progressed, more and more within the community realized that new technology, such as motion pictures, along with the theaters themselves, were here to stay. Therefore, as the popularity of theaters reached its apex during the 1920s, blue laws increasingly came to be seen as relics of the past. In the controversy over Sunday shows, the social reformers' attempts to control the theater became anachronistic. Although most were sincere in their desire to improve upon a society in a state of great change, their solutions harkened back to a previous era, and their actions became more and more irrelevant to the modern world.

With the growing acceptance of Sunday shows, the reform movement was dealt a serious blow, and much of the criticism directed toward theaters fell by the wayside. Yet in spite of the allowance of Sunday performances, reform efforts did not disappear entirely. Instead they essentially became redirected through the activities of the local Censorship Board, which grew stronger during the 1920s when it banned numerous plays and motion pictures because of perceived indecency, especially those

involving sexuality, alcohol, or criminal activity. By the 1920s and 1930s, however, even these censorship efforts would be overshadowed by the tremendous success enjoyed by motion pictures and vaudeville theaters across the nation.

CHAPTER 3

The Local Censorship Board, 1920 to 1940.

*If you can bring moral order out of this you can unravel Italian spaghetti.*¹

During the 1920s the crusade against indecency in Dallas theaters continued, as the local Censorship Board banned numerous plays, performances, and motion pictures due to alleged indecency. Reform efforts in the 1920s escalated mainly as a result of the growing popularity of the film industry itself, and, in particular, the increasing presence of sexuality and crime in motion pictures. Reformers, who feared the effect such films might have on children under the age of sixteen, focused their attention on censoring any films or plays they considered objectionable. More often than not, however, theaters reversed a censor's decision on appeal, or worse still for the reformer, the censorship of a film or play could actually pique the public's interest and draw even larger crowds to a performance. In part because it achieved such mixed results, the Mayor abolished the Censorship Board in May 1929. Following this event, the reform movement as it pertains to the theater never fully regained its momentum during the 1930s. This chapter will examine the Censorship Board's

¹ *Dallas Morning News*, "Reviewing the Reviews," July 22, 1928.

attempts to regulate theatrical performances and discuss how and why the institution was never fully successful at controlling entertainment in Dallas theaters.

Initially, the Censorship Board offered one of the few effective ways in which reformers could try to control the moral standards of theater audiences. One of the first local initiatives came with an ordinance passed in March 1911, which regulated the showing of motion pictures in local theaters in addition to the “character of the show places and persons allowed to attend” the shows.² The law authorized the Censorship Board to ban a film or play outright or delete offensive scenes, if necessary. The basis for such decisions rested on whether a critic believed an “exhibition is calculated to corrupt the morals of youth, or is indecent, low or vulgar or calculated to promote racial prejudice or create disorder, or is reasonably calculated to cause a disturbance of the peace.” Given its wide scope, this law gave censors unparalleled authority over theaters in Dallas and led to the censorship of countless performances and films over the coming years.³

The ordinance became law as a result of the efforts of women’s social clubs in the area petitioning for the betterment of community services for the general public. These clubs carried out social reforms and enacted laws in support of their progressive ideals. For instance, the Federated Women’s Clubs of Texas pushed for legislation in support of compulsory education for children, greater consideration for the subjects of sex and hygiene for girls and boys, stricter regulation of foods, funds

² *Dallas Morning News*, “Picture Ordinance is Passed by Board,” March 18, 1911, 16. For more information on the development of such organizations on the national stage, see Nancy Rosenbloom, “Between Reform and Regulation: The Struggle over Film Censorship in Progressive America, 1909-1922,” *Film History* (1987): 307-325.

³ *Dallas Morning News*, “Asks City Attorney for Ruling—May Ask New Ordinance,” July 21, 1928.

for the planting of trees, the establishment of parks, playgrounds and “breathing spots” in the cities, and, of course, the censoring of public amusements. The Clubs’ justification for the censoring of public amusements, such as movie and vaudeville theaters, resulted from the belief that theaters could adversely affect children. Mrs. J. C. Muse, of Dallas, presented a report to the Women’s Clubs calling for reforms in the theaters. Her words reflect the prevailing attitude of many in the Women’s Clubs when she stated “Scarcely a moving picture film without its suggestion of crime or low morals! Scarcely a vaudeville without its vulgar features!” Such reactionary statements indicate the negative stigma the theater carried for many reformers in the modern era.⁴

Many progressive reformers opposed motion picture theaters and sought to censor films and limit children’s access to the theaters. Even individuals such as Jane Addams of Hull House had mixed feelings about movie theaters in Chicago. On the one hand, Addams recognized the important role theaters played in providing affordable entertainment for immigrant and working-class families. On the other hand, she and many progressives also criticized the theaters for their unhealthy conditions, and because young adults tended to gather there to watch shows of “dubious content” while left unattended. Addams considered many of the films to be lacking in cultural refinement and “clearly valued the classics of literature and legitimate theater more highly...than the cinema.” Above all else, Addams recognized the inherent value of a movie or play by acknowledging that the

⁴ *Dallas Morning News*, “Club Women Propose to Amend Texas Laws,” November 21, 1912, 6. For more information on Women’s Clubs in Texas see Enstam, *Woman and the Creation of Urban Life*, 136-156.

performance allowed the audience a temporary escape from the drudgery of everyday life in the city. It is difficult to determine whether womens groups in Dallas were as accepting as Jane Addams in Chicago. Both valued the “higher” forms of entertainment, such as legitimate theater, and both feared the effects unrefined theater could have on children in the city. However, Addams also accepted the fact that theaters offered an escape from everyday life for many of its working-class patrons, something that most reformers in Dallas did not readily admit.⁵

The stated goal of the Censorship Board in Dallas was to ensure that only acts of the highest quality would play in the city. This was a difficult, if not impossible task, however, because of the highly subjective nature of making such determinations. Such rulings became even more challenging when taking into account what was or was not suitable for children under the age of sixteen. For instance, scenes depicting crime, gambling, cheating, or murder, with knives or from hanging, were banned because of concerns that children might become desensitized to the violence. Crimes against property also became a subject of debate for reformers, since many were convinced that depictions of arson and theft also were dangerous for children to watch. As a result, even some of the most well known films, such as those starring Charlie Chaplin, could be considered offensive, because, as one critic noted, “Chaplin should not steal even if with gum on the end of a cane.” Although somewhat tame by modern standards, reformers took such concerns seriously and either edited shows or prevented them from being shown entirely.⁶

⁵ Jane Addams, *Spirit of Youth and the City Streets*, as quoted in J.A. Lindstrom, ““Almost Worse Than the Restrictive Measure:” Chicago Reformers and the Nickelodeons,” *Cinema Journal* (1999): 98.

⁶ *Dallas Morning News*, “Picture Films Topic of Mothers' Council,” July 22, 1915, 4.

Social reformers were also concerned with sexuality in film. For instance, reformers considered motion pictures that depicted actors using suggestive dancing, leers, or winks to be indecent and usually banned them outright. Yet reformers also regarded as acceptable actors who appeared partially clothed (such as those who wore bathing suits), although the setting or context of the picture could be a deciding factor in the decision. Reformers also considered marriage to be sacrosanct, and any film or play belittling the institution could be banned. Reformers regarded explicit displays of physical affection, both before and after marriage, to be unacceptable for children under the age of sixteen. In particular, any “mushy” or “sticky” love scenes were generally banned from theaters entirely. The opinions of reformers regarding respectability in the theater varied greatly, but without a doubt, the Censorship Board did have substantial control over theaters during the early twentieth century.⁷

The complex issue of censorship is further compounded by the fact that only three members served on the Censorship Board at one time. Investing such power in the hands of a few no doubt alienated many theater owners and caused many to call for expanding the Board. In addition to theater owners, others within the community also disagreed with certain aspects of the Censorship Board. Mrs. J. C. Muse, a member of the Dallas Federated Women’s Clubs, argued that the evaluation of films might be more effective if a woman were in charge of the censorship decisions. Yet in spite of its critics, the Board did enact numerous changes in Dallas theaters, such as better lighting (to “raise the moral standard” of the shows), better ventilation, and the keeping of emergency exits open during the performance. The committee also

⁷ Ibid.

adopted a plan providing for the creation of a weekly show for children, through which educational films could be presented. In spite of the occasional criticism from the community, the Board continued to regulate entertainment in Dallas until the end of the 1920s, and its decisions affected most every theater in existence during the early twentieth century. To better understand the impact of the Censorship Board on entertainment in Dallas, it is helpful to examine how it interacted with individual theaters throughout the city.⁸

The first of the smaller movie theaters to become a part of “Amusement Row,” or the entertainment district running along Elm Street in Central Dallas, was the Washington Theater, completed on Thanksgiving Day, 1912. In many ways, the Washington represented the transition of motion picture houses from small, dark businesses offering only limited entertainment to the much larger and more modern structures seen in the 1920s. At the time the Washington opened, its owner, W.D. Nevills, also owned several other theaters, including the Princess, the Palace, the Empress, the Dalton, the Candy, and the Nickelodeon, all of which were known as “store-show” theaters. Most people did not consider this type of theater to be a professional theater, but rather an operation where “with only slight remodeling a store was made into a ‘movie’ and vice versa.” By July 1912, Nevills moved his theater into a larger location and made efforts to improve the physical environment, because of both practical necessity and from the criticism reformers had of early theaters. After exhibiting a façade “resembling nothing so much as the Hellenistic Parthenon brought up to date,” the Washington also promised an experience that

⁸ *Dallas Morning News*, “Club Women Propose to Amend Texas Laws,” November 21, 1912.

would be “neat and not gaudy.” In addition, the movie house was designed so that patrons exited through long hallways out the sides of the theater instead of returning to the front where a new audience was waiting to enter. This type of construction would become common in other movie houses during the era.⁹

Other early movie theaters in the city consisted of the Old Mill, the Queen, the Crystal, and the Hippodrome. Of these theaters, the Hippodrome alone would endure censorship, although every theater at this time offered similar shows, and each faced the possibility of clashing with the Censorship Board.¹⁰ As with the other smaller movie houses, the Hippodrome played a diminishing role by the early 1920s due to the changing tastes of audiences and the creation of three larger and more modern picture houses in Dallas. Yet one of the most notable instances of censorship occurred at the Hippodrome in September 1916, when the play *The Girl Without a Chance*

⁹ *Dallas Morning News*, “Washington Theater, Earliest Dallas ‘Movie Palace,’ Shows Last Close-up after 15 Years,” July 3, 1927, 4. The subject of why urban reformers sought to close down these early theaters is taken up in Lindstrom’s “Almost Worse than the Restrictive Measures.” Other theaters or buildings in Dallas that housed theatrical performances not covered in this study are the Gaiety Theater, Foy’s Neighborhood Theaters, the Coliseum, and the Lake Cliff Casino because of time constraints, and because there were no available incidences of censorship. Additionally, the Little Theater will not be addressed, because it did not provide professional entertainment, but instead offered only local talent. Other works have taken a similar stance, such as Jackson Davis’ “A History of Professional Theater in Dallas, Texas, 1920-1930.”

¹⁰ Jackson Davis, “A History of Professional Theater in Dallas, Texas, 1920-1930,” 14 and 33-37. Most were situated along the entertainment district of Dallas located along Elm Street, and by 1921 each operated under the regional management of E.H. Hulsey of Southern Enterprises. The Queen Theater, built in 1912, carried a policy of exclusively showing motion pictures to audiences. The Crystal opened on September 6, 1914 and also became a popular movie house for residents in the city. The Old Mill Theatre, which opened on June 29, 1913 under the management of brothers Frank and Roy Dalton, initially ran a policy of tabloid or “tab” shows in the city, but then switched over to what was considered a more traditional vaudeville show. The differences at times were subtle. Essentially, however, tab shows offered cheaper prices—running from 10 cents to 30 cents (as opposed to 50 cents to as high as \$1.50 for a vaudeville show)—and were generally considered “an inferior type of variety program that used an abbreviated and distorted musical comedy plot.” Eventually the Old Mill adopted a policy of showing motion pictures by 1914. The Hippodrome also carried a similar program for its patrons by offering vaudeville acts accompanied with a feature picture for its shows. This practice later changed to a show containing motion pictures, vaudeville acts, and a musical comedy company. Again, because this thesis is focused on the reform movement, it will not address the histories of these other Dallas theaters.

caused an uproar with reformers over issues of immorality. Speaking for the local Censorship Board, Mr. Hanley indicated that “the board...will at no time countenance a play dealing with the white slave business,” in spite of it being “intelligently written...and intelligently and dramatically interpreted.” The importance of censorship in this instance is its reflection of contemporary anxieties over sexuality and prostitution and widespread fears of a society undergoing tremendous modernization. No matter how well acted or written, the material in the play was perceived to be too risqué for Dallas audiences, and, therefore, it was banned outright by the Censorship Board without even the benefit of a second hearing.¹¹

In the summer of 1917, Mayor Joe Lawther expanded the Censorship Board by appointing a total of eight members, an increase from the three-member board of years past. Reed Finley sought reappointment, and, perhaps because of her prior experience serving as censor, had the support of the Dallas Council of Mothers. A second candidate, Ethel Boyce, also entered the race as a candidate. Boyce ultimately won the position and would lead censorship activities in Dallas throughout the 1920s. Even though she technically never served as head of the Censorship Board, Boyce acted as its nominal leader because of her strong belief in the censorship of theatrical entertainment. As a result, Boyce became one of the most determined leaders in the campaign to reform entertainment, and she was instrumental in the censorship of numerous plays and films in Dallas theaters.¹²

¹¹ *Dallas Morning News*, “Censor Board Denies Rehearing on Play,” September 24, 1916, 10. The Hippodrome lasted until 1927, but by that time had degenerated into a second-run movie picture house that mainly showed westerns.

¹² *Dallas Morning News*, June 26, 1917 “Lawther Announces Board Nominations,” page 4; “Mothers Urge Reappointment of Mrs. Finley as Censor” June 27, 1917 18; and June 28, 1917, “Mrs. Boyce Appointed by City Commission,” 6.

One of Ethel Boyce's first decisions involved an unlikely venue, the Dallas Opera House. The Dallas Opera House never experienced the same type of controversy many other theaters faced in the early twentieth century, but one of the only instances in which the theater did encounter censorship came in October 1917. On that date, Ethel Boyce banned the play entitled *Her Unborn Babe*. On this particular instance, the management of the Dallas Opera House appealed Boyce's decision to the City Board of Censorship, who then overturned her ruling. Although this is the only example of censorship directed toward the Dallas Opera House, it is still important to note that reformers sometimes targeted opera houses.¹³

By the 1920s, theaters brought together several different forms of entertainment under one roof. Earlier types of entertainment, such as vaudeville, remained popular, while others, such as the minstrel show, legitimate, and tabloid theater, struggled to survive, largely as a result of the introduction of new technology into the market. The greatest threat to live entertainment came from motion pictures. At first the theater industry embraced this new technology by incorporating it into its shows, such as through offering half vaudeville and half motion picture lineups. By the end of the decade, however, audiences had come to prefer motion pictures over older, less versatile forms of entertainment. In addition, the popularity of crime films and all-girl tabloid shows steadily increased, leading to growing efforts at censorship. In order to cater to these changing tastes, owners constructed larger theaters during the first half of the decade to facilitate the growing demand for motion pictures. The Melba, the Palace, and the "new" Majestic theaters could be considered the most

¹³ *Dallas Morning News*, "Censorship Board Permits Presentation of Play Here," October 25, 1917, 11.

prominent in Dallas during the 1920s. Others included the Capitol, the Circle, and the Jefferson theaters. Each would face the threat of censorship in the coming years.

The Jefferson Theater, which opened on March 9, 1915, posed several problems for reformers and the Censorship Board. Although there is no evidence suggesting that the Jefferson encountered problems with reformers in the 1910s, by the next decade it offered more sexually suggestive shows, which subsequently drew the attention of censors. The inclusion of “all-girl” shows by the Jefferson was part of a premeditated plan to bring in larger audiences, since the theater was small and unable to afford big name performers. For example, in the December 23, 1920 performance of *Buzzin Around*, a reviewer noted that, “if there is a girl in the company who is not a good looker, she was too sick to appear Thursday.” Such performances generally provided physically attractive women and not necessarily the most talented of performers. This may have been the case with Will Debrow and his “Blue Grass Belles,” who played the theater on January 14, 1922. Even though the audience generally enjoyed the show, the reviewer noted:

The balcony was openly hostile to the magician, who pulled a lot of old tricks with equipment which was battered with age and too long service. The girl who assisted him however was good looking enough so that many in the audience watched her and rested their eyes instead of seeing her partner do just what everybody knew he would.¹⁴

¹⁴ *Dallas Morning News*, Monday, January 15, 1923, 4. As quoted in Davis, “A History of Professional Theater in Dallas, Texas.” 308.

Such reports indicate that the Jefferson had adopted a policy of offering all-girl shows by the early 1920s, and, more importantly, that the theater hosted shows which, on some level, could have been considered sexually suggestive by reformers. As one account demonstrates, “The major censorship problems in the city were to come in the late 1920’s and early 1930’s when the ‘girly’ shows...laid heavy stress on nudity and suggestiveness.” The use of sexuality or physical attractiveness in the theater was nothing new, but censorship of such programs did increase considerably. As has already been demonstrated, one of the main problems the Censorship Board found in modern entertainment came about because of sexuality on stage and on screen.¹⁵

Local censors found fault with other aspects of films and performances in the theaters as well. For example, the Circle Theater, built in December 1923, to house legitimate productions, drew the consternation of critics through its showing of the play *White Cargo*. The Censorship Board briefly banned *White Cargo* in 1925, mainly as a result of the efforts of Ethel Boyce, who condemned the play because of ““excessive profanity, a too dominant sex theme and offensive racial allusions.”” Despite the protestations of Boyce, however, “the large audience of respectable citizens...seemed to enjoy the piece without being visibly shocked at the occasional ‘cuss word,’ or even the seduction scene in which a mulatto vampire turned her wiles upon a pathetically lonely, homesick young Englishman.” The audience’s favorable reaction to the play suggests that most theatergoers were at odds with the views of the Censorship Board. Managers for the theater soon took steps to appeal Boyce’s

¹⁵ Davis, “A History of Professional Theater in Dallas, Texas,” 428.

decision and succeeded in having her ruling reversed. Although the Censorship Board had become both a formidable force in Dallas theaters, especially through the efforts of Ethel Boyce and others, the Board's decisions sometimes were overturned, and the theaters were allowed to continue with their scheduled entertainment.¹⁶

The racial themes inherent in the showing of *White Cargo* also relate to the many black owned and operated theaters in Dallas during the twentieth century. The Black Elephant, a variety theater condemned by reformers in the 1890s, was followed in the 1910s and 1920s by a handful of black vaudeville and motion picture houses that were built in the city. The two most prominent black theaters were the Ella B. Moore Theater and The Palace Theater. The Palace Theater (not to be confused with the white-owned theater of the same name), showed mainly motion pictures. In 1921, the theater attempted to show the film *Yankee Doodle in Berlin*, but was stopped, according to one source, because the "posters in front of the theater 'showed white girls, nearly nude, in several inflaming situations.'" Here again Ethel Boyce led the charge, citing afterwards that "the picture and posters might have had a bad effect on the morals of the negro patrons." Whether Boyce's decision resulted from a genuine concern for black audiences or because of the racial taboos inherent in such a showing is not known. What can be inferred from Boyce's actions is that city censors did frequent black theaters, and these theaters were ostensibly held to the same standards of decency as others in Dallas.¹⁷

¹⁶ *Dallas Morning News*, February 27, 1925, and Davis, "A History of Professional Theater in Dallas, Texas," 184.

¹⁷ Davis, "A History of Professional Theater in Dallas, Texas, 1920-1930," 430.

Another renowned theater in the city, the Ella B. Moore Theater, owned and operated by Chintz and Ella Moore, offered countless black vaudeville attractions for Dallas residents. Built in October 1924, the theater itself was of a first-class nature, having “a ground floor which could accommodate 600 persons, a balcony that seated 500, loge seats for 100 and four boxes.” Many also considered the theater to be the “most fashionable theater on the T.O.B.A. (Theater Owners Booking Association) circuit in the Southwest.” Clearly the Ella Moore’s design allowed for the theater to be the first of its kind in Dallas and perhaps even in Texas, providing the best vaudeville entertainment to the black community available at the time.¹⁸

The Ella B. Moore Theater brought some of the most prominent black vaudeville entertainers from all over the country to Dallas. Having opened in 1924, the Ella Moore Theater arrived late on the vaudeville scene, but it soon offered numerous acts through the T.O.B.A. One of the more famous recording artists and theatrical entertainers to appear at the theater was Ida Cox, whose 1929 tour of the Southwest brought her to Dallas. This tour marked the first time Cox offered her “Raisin’ Cain Company,” which she had only recently formed. Dallas audiences, comprised of both black and white members, responded favorably, and Cox and her company grossed \$3,000 on the first week, despite “half of the week in bad weather.” Because the show was staged for mixed audiences, it became the most successful

¹⁸ Henry Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 130. The Ella Moore Theater, like every theater in the city, also gave back to the community in various ways. In 1927, the Ella Moore Theater was the site of a midnight benefit performance that assisted in flood relief work for numerous black residents in Dallas. The theater opened its doors to the community by allowing students of the Booker T. Washington School to give a benefit performance to entertain those who had been ravaged by the storm and donated all of the proceeds to the Red Cross for relief efforts.²³ *Dallas Morning News*, “Midnight Benefit Performance,” May 8, 1927, 7.

“midnight ramble” for whites in the “history of the 15 years of theater business in Dallas by the Moores.”¹⁹

Ida Cox’s visit is also important, because it demonstrates the dedication of black theaters and vaudeville companies to maintaining a level of decorum for their audiences. The “Raisin’ Cain” company maintained a reputation from reviewers as being “a clean, classy show from start to finish, with costumes appropriate for the attraction and in accordance with the reputation of Miss Cox herself.” Not every performer upheld the same moral maxims as Cox, however. One article, entitled “Let’s Cut Out Vulgarly” that appeared in the entertainment section of *The Chicago Defender* noted “Unfortunately some of our stage performers take delight in using vulgar and indecent language. The public will stand for jokes that are a bit risqué, but vulgarity has no place on the stage. The class that approves of such drives away the theater-loving public.” More than just a trivial warning, such statements actually point to the difficult position held by theaters in society at the time. On the one hand, audiences wanted fresh material that could entertain or make them laugh. Performers, therefore, tended to push the boundary of what reformers considered acceptable entertainment in order to remain successful with audiences. On the other hand, such attempts also led to an increase in censorship and the perceived need for the regulation of entertainment in theaters.²⁰

¹⁹ *Chicago Defender* Saturday, March 2, 1929, “Texas Tattles” by Wyatt D. James. Many famous black vaudeville artists came to the Ella Moore Theater during the 1920s, including the well-respected Whitman Sisters, who performed at the theater in 1927. *Chicago Defender*, March 12, 1927. For more information on the Whitman Sisters see Nadine George-Graves, *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters and the Negotiation of Race, Gender and Class in African American Theater, 1900-1940*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000).

²⁰ *Chicago Defender*, “Texas Tattles,” March 2, 1929 by Wyatt D. James. On her appearance in Dallas Ida Cox also stopped off at the “world’s oldest municipal radio station,” WRR. The well-known blues

The Ella Moore is also representative of a renewed interest in the building of larger, more visibly sophisticated theaters in the city. In part, this started as an effort to appease the aesthetic needs of audiences, including reformers, who sought an evening of wholesome, yet dramatic entertainment. It is also a testament to the enormous popularity of theaters during the 1920s in Dallas and elsewhere. Of these the Melba, the “new” Majestic, the Capitol, and the Palace theaters became the most popular with residents, and each experienced difficulties with the Censorship Board during their long tenure in Dallas.

As mentioned earlier, the Majestic Theater experienced problems with reformers at the beginning of the century because of its Sunday shows. Although the theater endured enormous criticism over this controversy, eventually all theaters in Dallas began to offer Sunday shows. Despite the Majestic’s overwhelming popularity with audiences, however, the theater experienced criticism because of indecent performances. In 1927, Ethel Boyce led the opposition to a vaudeville sketch at the Majestic on the grounds of “irrelevance.” Remarkably, the rejection of the play became the first censored for reasons other than “immoral tone or subversive influence on the young.” The first act of the play began with an opening scene of a graveyard where “tombstones were shown mocking old-fashioned epitaphs.” Later on during the performance, “Corpses came to life with complete lack of seriousness,” and by the end of the play, the lead comedian “danced about the stage as an ‘angel’ puffing a stogie.” For all of these reasons, Boyce successfully removed the act from

singer and recording artist sang six songs while her piano player, Jesse Crump, played twenty piano numbers for audiences on the air. Even by this early era the popularity of radio and sound recordings had a considerable impact on the theater industry.

the show at the Majestic. Such an example illustrates that even at a well-respected and popular theater, performances could be censored for the simplest of reasons.²¹

Another major motion picture house in the city was the Capitol Theater, built during the renewed interest in picture houses at the beginning of the 1920s. Critics and audiences alike enjoyed the majority of pictures shown at the Capitol. In 1928, however, some debate arose with the Censorship Board over whether to allow the film version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. A two million dollar adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, the film became a topic of concern for the Board, because it had recently been banned in Atlanta and New Orleans. perhaps because both the book and the movie were sympathetic toward blacks while being critical of many southern whites. Despite being banned elsewhere in the South, the Dallas Censorship Board screened the picture and allowed its showing to continue as scheduled at the Capitol.²²

An even more controversial picture played the Capitol at roughly the same time. The film *Walking Back* received condemnation from Ethel Boyce because of its sexual suggestiveness. More specifically, Boyce decried the "somewhat orgiastic activities of boys and girls with some sequences of cocktail drinking and one other

²¹ *Dallas Morning News*. "Censors Stop Majestic Act," May 30, 1920." The only other instance found was the showing of "Frankenstein" in *Dallas Morning News* "Frankenstein to be shown without Cuts" December 1, 1931, 10.

²² *Dallas Morning News*, "Censor to See "Uncle Tom's Cabin" Tuesday" August 21, 1928. In 1882, the play was shown in Dallas and some critics found the play's message objectionable. As a major southern city, Dallas was still very sensitive on issues of race and the Civil War, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had the potential of stoking the embers of racial enmity. Although it was reported as being well received by audiences, one critic noted that the play "does a gross injustice and most palpable wrong and is hence a libel upon the southern people, as it takes up an exceptional case and fires the northern breast with the feeling that such was the rule under former regime with the institution of slavery." *Dallas Herald* October 12, 1882.

that disclosed 'backpainting' as a social sport made possible by décolletés."²³ Scenes or plays featuring alcohol, crime, and sexuality often were the most frequently targeted by the Censorship Board during the late 1920s. Due to the opinions of the lead censor, regulations eventually came into effect stipulating that "Women on the stage must be covered at least from the waistline to the neck. Off-color dialogue and monologue, if it gets by at all, must be cloaked in euphemism." Even more important is that the repeated censorship of performances began to negatively influence theater agents who booked shows in Dallas. One source indicates that "Agents for road shows...have written an asterisk beside Dallas to beware of the city hall. In truth, Dallas now shares with Houston and distinction as the most censored city in the Southwest." Clearly the issue of censorship became so critical that it tarnished the image of Dallas as a city supportive of the arts.²⁴

Another motion picture theater popular with audiences, the Palace Theater, opened in Dallas on June 11, 1921, and advertised itself as a "million dollar theater." The playbill for opening night prominently heralded the financial investment the theater had made for its patrons and noted the high cost required to provide "An atmosphere of luxury and refinement." The Palace "stands as the largest and finest theatre in Texas," its managers declared, informing audiences that "million dollar theatres have never been profitable in cities of twice the population of Dallas."²⁵

²³ *Dallas Morning News*, "Two Silent Films and One 'Talky' Censored Here in One Week; Two Banned on Grounds Other Than Impropriety." June 28, 1928.

²⁴ *Dallas Morning News*, November 28, 1928, 4 as quoted in Davis, "A History of Professional Theater in Dallas, Texas," 432.

²⁵ "Palace Grand Opening Playbill," June 11, 1921, Box 25, Interstate Theater Collection, Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas.

The Palace did fulfill its role as a leading motion picture house in Dallas, if not the entire state. By the end of the decade even million dollar theaters, however, encountered difficulties with local censors. In particular the lead censor, Ethel Boyce, found fault with the theater's showing of a 1928 crime film entitled *The Racket*. Boyce's opposition stemmed from the film's depiction of crime, and, specifically, because "Murder is committed before one's eyes several times and the picture deals with depravity from beginning to end." The censor's condemnation of the film rested less with the actual material on screen, however, and more with the continued popularity of the genre itself. In her words, "there have been so many of them that they are beginning to have a deleterious effect on the public and especially on younger audiences."²⁶

No doubt because of her actions for children, the local Parent-Teacher's Council fully backed the censor's decision on *The Racket*. The chairman of the Censorship Board, W.A. Browning, confirmed the concerns for children in attendance voiced by Boyce. Children, especially those aged twelve to twenty, who continuously watched such performances became the most susceptible. While examining these films, Browning "observed children in the audiences...and watched them jumping hysterically about their seats, screaming irrationally, biting their finger nails and showing other signs of nervous disorder." The repeated showing of crime films could only have a negative effect on the children of Dallas, according to the main critics of *The Racket*.²⁷

²⁶ *Dallas Morning News*, "Censor Bars 'Racket' for Dallas, Indicating Ban on All Gruesome Crime Films." July 18, 1928.

²⁷ Ibid.

Others in the city apparently believed differently, however, as the Board of Appeals overturned Boyce's decision following a petition from managers at the Palace. The reasons for the new judgment revolved around *The Racket* being essentially of the same nature as other crime films not banned by the Censorship Board. The Board did agree that crime pictures in general served as a negative influence on theatergoers, but found little in the film to censure. Moreover, what the censors did find fault with in the film they simply cut out. Two scenes in particular involved "the drinking of liquor out of a bottle and the shooting of a policeman in the back." The removal of individual scenes became a common practice for censors and theater managers alike during the era, but based on those reactions voiced in opposition to Boyce, she more than likely overstepped her grounds by banning the film outright.²⁸

John Rosenfield Jr., local theater critic for the *Dallas Morning News*, also voiced his opposition to the censorship of the film. He agreed with the censors that the vast number of crime films became more of a cause for their censorship than for any specific moral outrage. The theater critic recognized that any claims of moral righteousness on the part of censors simply did not make sense. If one investigated all of the rulings of the censors, Rosenfield argued, "He finds one 'underworld' picture barred because it treats crime with levity and another banned because it treats crime seriously...If you can bring moral order out of this you can unravel Italian spaghetti." In addressing the supposedly negative effect motion pictures had on children,

²⁸ *Dallas Morning News*, "Board of Appeals Reverses Censor, Permitting Palace to Play 'Underworld' Film," July 20, 1928.

Rosenfield maintained that the argument was immaterial, and that in using it, censors were simply “groping for tenable ground in their battle.” The answer, according to Rosenfield, lay with a “criteria of good taste,” which would allow censors the opportunity for “less confusion and perhaps a more salubrious by-product to their labors.” By the end of the month the Palace showed the film without any public outcry over indecency on the screen. The local reviewer noted the film’s success with audiences and that it seemed to be “ridiculously anticlimax” for all the trouble put forth by censors.²⁹

Perhaps as a result of the controversial nature of the decisions, or because the censorship of plays or films tended to actually increase attendance at the theaters, the Mayor abolished the Censorship Board in May 1929. This action did not end censorship activities, however. During the 1930s, the chief of police retained the power to close down a play or film considered unacceptable. Although problems still arose over censorship issues, the number and volatility of the instances decreased dramatically. The reform movement as a whole did not continue much longer.³⁰

One of the few instances to occur at a major motion picture house during this period came in 1932 at the Melba Theater, with the film *The Guardsman*. The manager of the Melba, Commodore Paul Short, expressed concern over the film, because he deemed it “too risqué,” and therefore canceled the showing of the film on several different occasions. On January 19 of that year a preview of the picture was

²⁹ *Dallas Morning News*, “The New Picture Reviewed,” July 23, 1928, by John Rosenfield Jr.

³⁰ Davis, “A History of Professional Theater in Dallas, Texas,” 434. During the 1930s, a similar movement occurred in Dallas dance halls, which attempted to deny the selling of alcohol (during prohibition), and remove behavior considered indecent, such as suggestive dancing. Also of interest is that the movement’s leader, Ethel Randall, became equally as dominant in the reform movement as Ethel Boyce had been with theaters.

held for audiences with 50 feet (later acknowledged to be 600 feet) of “indecent” material cut from the film. The manager removed an “amorous love scene and an episode concerning an indiscriminate distribution of door keys,” which according to the reviewer “did not destroy the story, but left disturbing gaps in the continuity” of the picture.³¹ Following the public outcry over the cuts, Manager Short then distributed a questionnaire to his audiences to gauge whether they considered such films acceptable entertainment or whether censorship should be enforced. The audiences gave a firm disapproval of the censorship of such films. Of the 300 questionnaires given out, only 108 responded, and only two of these favored deletions, with the rest believing deletions to be unnecessary. The results of this questionnaire overwhelmingly indicate that most Dallas theatergoers did not find censorship necessary for most films and plays.³²

The removal of scenes also caused a dispute with the movie company that released the film, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. The local branch manager of the company, LeRoy Bickel, stated that as much as 600 feet or (more than one-half of a reel) had been cut, and the company would rather withdraw the film than have it shown in such a “mutilated fashion.” Bickel did not see why the picture could be considered too “risqué,” as the film offered “little more than a photographed and recorded version of a very famous stage play” that had toured across the country to the approval of audiences. The Melba’s manager countered by saying the theater has the right to remove any part of a film it considers offensive, and that he only wanted to “make the

³¹ *Dallas Morning News*, “‘Guardsman’ Seen with 50 feet cut,” January 20, 1932, 11.

³² *Dallas Morning News*, “Reactions of Fans toward Censorship of ‘Guardsman,’” January 25, 1932, 4.

picture acceptable to all kinds of audiences.” The Melba eventually prevailed because of the record attendance at the box office for the film. The censorship of *The Guardsman* is a good example that in spite of the censorship of a film or play, most people continued to attend the performance. In fact, the clamor over censorship tended to increase attendance at the theaters, and some even believed managers purposefully censored films and plays in order to boost turnout.³³

The example of *The Guardsman* indicates that, overall, neither audiences nor film companies approved of the independent censorship of films by local theater managers. The practice more than likely ruined the contiguity of the film and spoiled the overall experience for theatergoers. Whether censorship of *The Guardsman* and other films by theater managers occurred because of a sincere concern for audiences is unknown. It very well could be that the continued presence of censorship activities by reformers in recent years pushed theater managers to overcompensate and censor any material they believed would not pass inspection. Yet there is also the financial aspect as well. If the censorship of a film or play did increase demand from audiences to attend a performance, as some in the theater community have suggested, then it is likely that theater managers during the Depression would actively pursue such a course. In any case, this movement to internally censor shows at a theater originated because of the well-established threat from reformers to censor or ban performances. Furthermore, the reaction of audiences against theater managers acting on their own initiative to censor films indicates the hostility to the practice within the community.

³³ *Dallas Morning News*, January 21, 1932 “Metro Objects to Scene Cut from *Guardsman*,” 4 Local theater reviewer, John Rosenfield Jr. and others believed managers did so purposefully.

In Dallas, the Censorship Board originated out of women's social groups pushing for the greater regulation of public amusements. Groups such as the local Parent-Teacher's Council and the Federated Women's Clubs prodded the Censorship Board to vigorously enforce regulation. The Censorship Board voiced its concerns over the state of films and plays, especially those depicting violence, alcohol, criminal activity, and sexuality. The extent of the Board's powers reached most every theater in Dallas during this period, and countless performances were censored over the years. Even the most well respected theaters could not prevent reformers from canceling shows or removing offensive material. By 1917, moreover, Ethel Boyce became the dominant figure in the activities of reformers, and carried the movement until the dissolution of the Board in 1929. Her work, more than any other, symbolized the reformer's attempt to improve the theater. Though many of the censorship activities she led did resonate with certain members of Dallas society, most in the community simply wanted to attend the theater and did not concern themselves with indecent material or the need for censorship. This can be seen with the many successful appeals following the initial censorship of performances. Furthermore, Boyce and other reformers never adopted a consistent policy for censorship. The haphazard approach taken by many reformers aggravated many within the community, especially theater owners. As with the case of reformers in previous years, many of those affiliated with the Censorship Board may have had the best of intentions, but their solutions for the excesses of modern life simply did not work effectively.

By the 1930s, the movement to censor theatrical performances experienced a noticeable decline in importance within the community. The motion picture industry, in particular, had by that time gained acceptance within communities across the country. Though reformers still continued to censor performances and decry the degenerative effects some movies had on children, their efforts were not as strong as they once were and essentially became limited to rare or exceptional cases. In effect, such a battle between censors and motion picture companies over the standards of decency in films never really disappeared and continues even today.

CONCLUSION

After examining the reform movement in Dallas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is evident that the theater as a cultural institution is an important barometer for measuring social change in the local community. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the enormous social transformations then occurring impacted every aspect of Dallas society, including the theater. Reformers concentrated on the theater because of its overwhelming popularity, its association with public vices, and the forces of modernization at work inside the theaters.

During the 1890s, reformers sought the closure of variety theaters because of their allowance of alcohol, gambling, supposed prostitution, and Sunday performances. Even though some variety theaters did permit these public vices on their premises, evidence suggests that reformers acted hastily, and often were influenced by external agents. Theaters known as opera houses also offered alcohol to their patrons on occasion, which demonstrates that even theaters designed for the expressed purpose of offering refined entertainment did not always escape the attention of reformers. The Craddock Opera House in particular became associated with the selling of alcohol, which was also the most frequent criticism of variety theaters by reformers. Furthermore, Thompson's Variety Theater operated in the city for close to two decades while serving alcohol without encountering a single criticism

from reformers. That is until all variety theaters were shut down in the city in 1893. It was during the summer of 1893 that reformers initiated their strongest and most successful campaign against variety theaters. As many individuals at the time suggested (including those on the Dallas City Council), the impetus for this latest effort was the arrival of the popular Methodist preacher, Sam Jones. His charismatic oratorical style convinced many in the community of the need to clean up the city by removing its saloons and variety theaters. However, the rather impetuous nature of this reform campaign is demonstrated by the fact that members of the City Council rejected the option of suspending the licenses of variety theaters after their leases expired in favor of immediate and absolute dissolution. Because of this decision, many theater owners and their employees were left without jobs or a source of income and were given few options except to fight in court or to leave town.

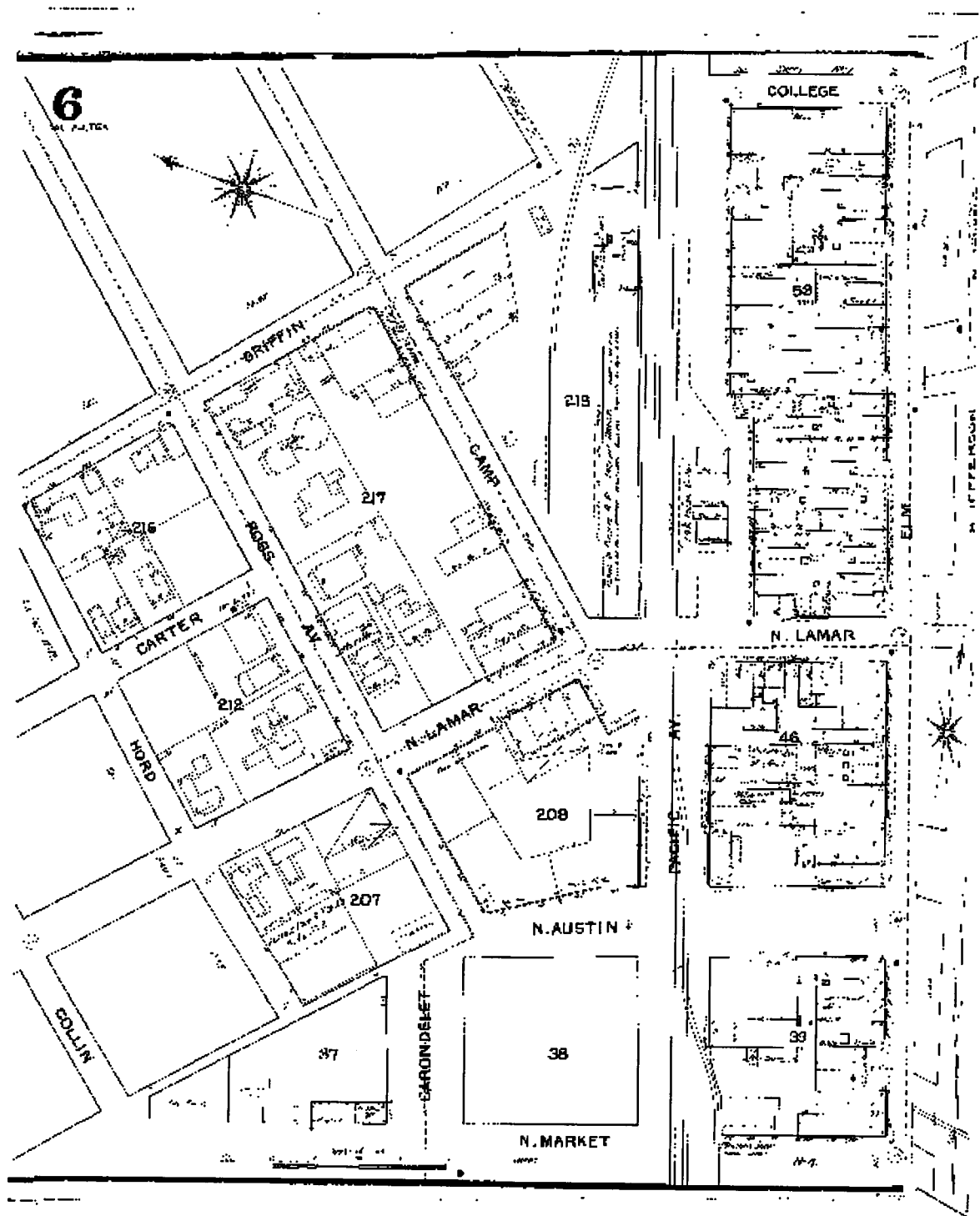
By the twentieth century, reform efforts continued with the battle over the enforcement of Sunday statutes. In Dallas, the main target was the Majestic Theater. Almost immediately after its completion in 1906, the Majestic was openly condemned for its policy of offering Sunday shows. The main source for this renewed drive to enforce Sunday laws came, not surprisingly, from the religious clergy. Perhaps because of a loss of status within the community, or because the theater directly impinged upon attendance at Church, church leaders quickly became the most vocal opponents of theaters that offered shows on Sunday. Yet, the religious clergy were not unanimous in their disapproval of Sunday shows. Several clergymen expressed interest in the ability of theaters to captivate the imagination of their audiences, and, more importantly, indicated that there were more serious concerns

upon which the clergy should focus their attention. The attacks against the Majestic Theater continued, however, as many of its employees faced years of legal disputes and even imprisonment for simply providing shows for audiences on Sundays. Equally severe as any of the attacks made against theaters and their owners, the Sunday ordinance put an unfair strain on local businesses that were without the capital to operate on only six days out of the week. As with many theaters, the Majestic and its employees faced a significant loss in revenue because of this threat from reformers, not to mention the expenses associated with continuing the legal battles in court. Due to public opinion largely being on the side of the theaters these efforts failed by the 1920s and theaters once more gained the upper hand and resumed their shows on Sunday.

By the 1920s, reform efforts were mainly limited to the authority of the municipal Censorship Board. Time after time, reformers either censored a play for its indecent material or shut down a performance entirely. In large part the vigor with which plays and films were censored can be attributed to the efforts of such individuals as Ethel Boyce. Her work as a leading member of the Censorship Board is perhaps the greatest reason for the large number of instances of censorship that occurred in Dallas. However, her rulings, and the Censorship Board's in general, were plagued by inconsistent decisions that caused confusion with theater owners and audiences alike. It is uncertain whether such rulings negatively or positively affected theaters in Dallas, as censorship was known to actually increase attendance on occasion, but there is little doubt that the Censorship Board did edit or ban performances at theaters for the purposes of upholding the "moral decency" of Dallas.

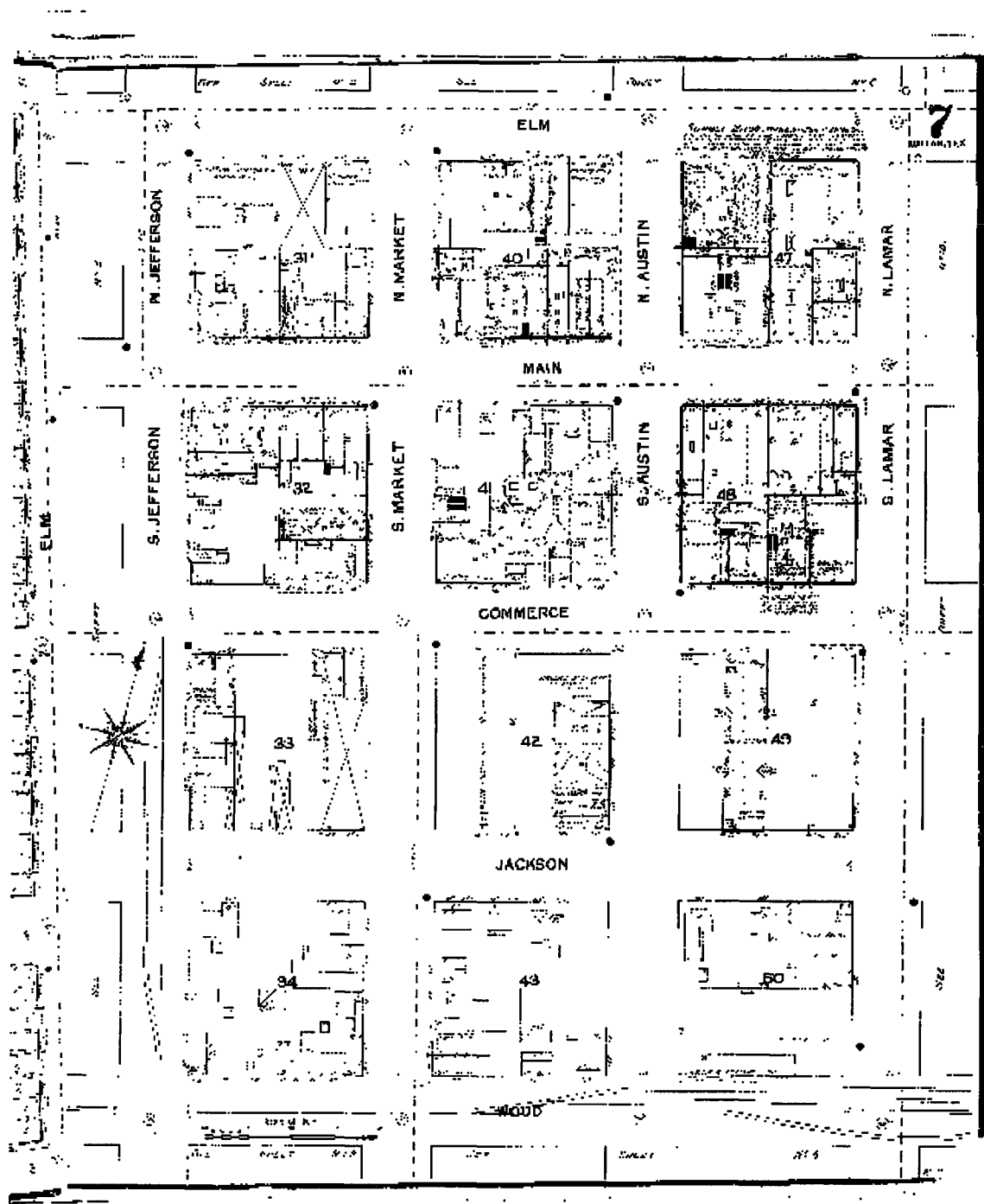
Yet the undeniable success of vaudeville and motion pictures during the decade inhibited reformers from censoring all of the shows they deemed indecent, because audiences continued to clamor for popular films and plays, even (or especially) when they contained purportedly unsuitable material. Furthermore, because many of the decisions of the Censorship Board were reversed on appeal, the effectiveness of the Censorship Board itself must be questioned. If, regardless of the actions of the Censorship Board, Dallas audiences still saw most plays and films that were considered indecent, then the efforts to curb immorality on stage were essentially fruitless. Perhaps it is because of this that the Censorship Board was abolished in 1929, and censorship in the 1930s was of a very limited nature.

Map 1 Camp & Griffin Street Variety Theater



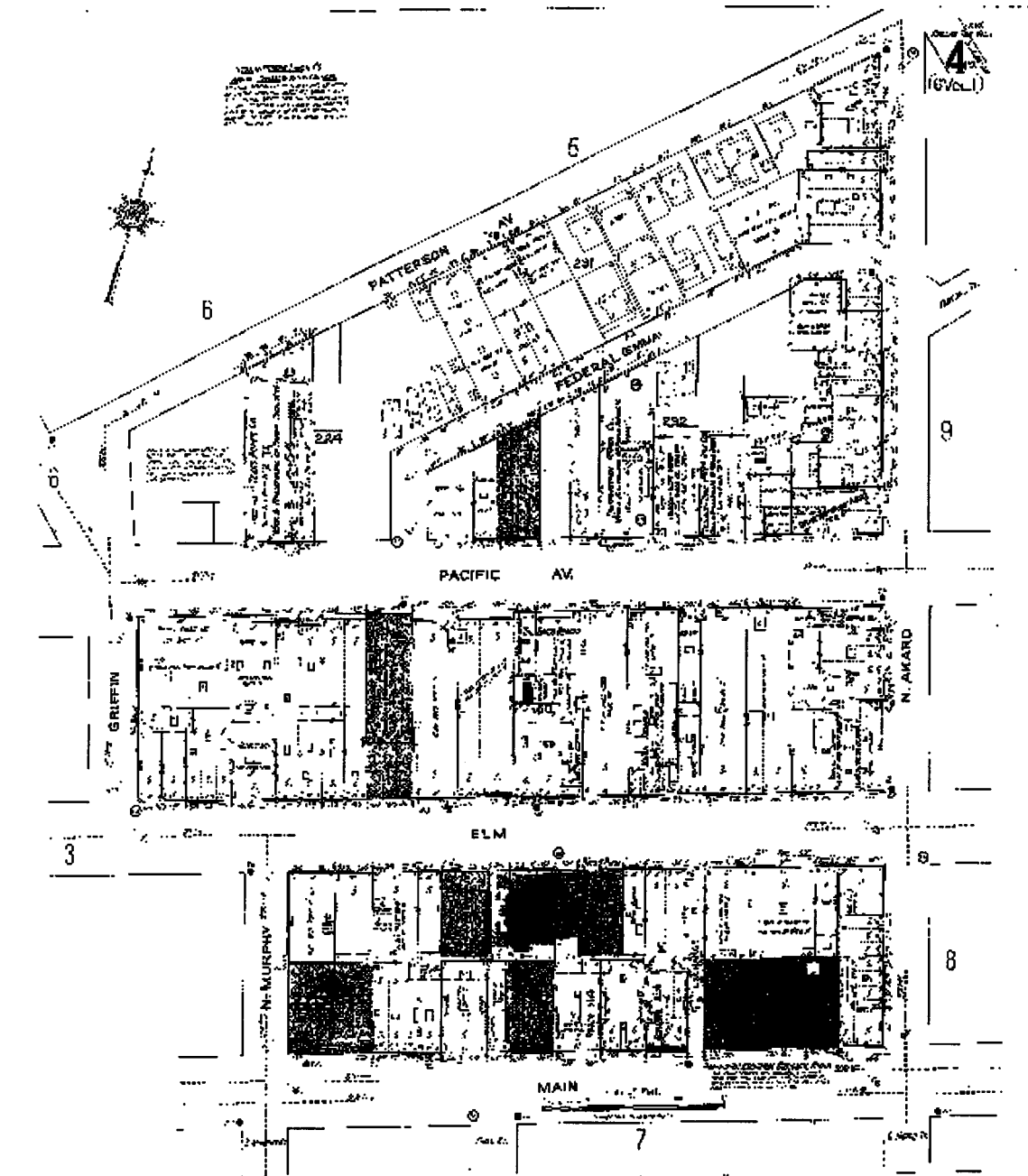
Dallas 1892

Map 2 Supposed Location of Thompson's Theater. (Main Street between Austin and Lamar Streets)



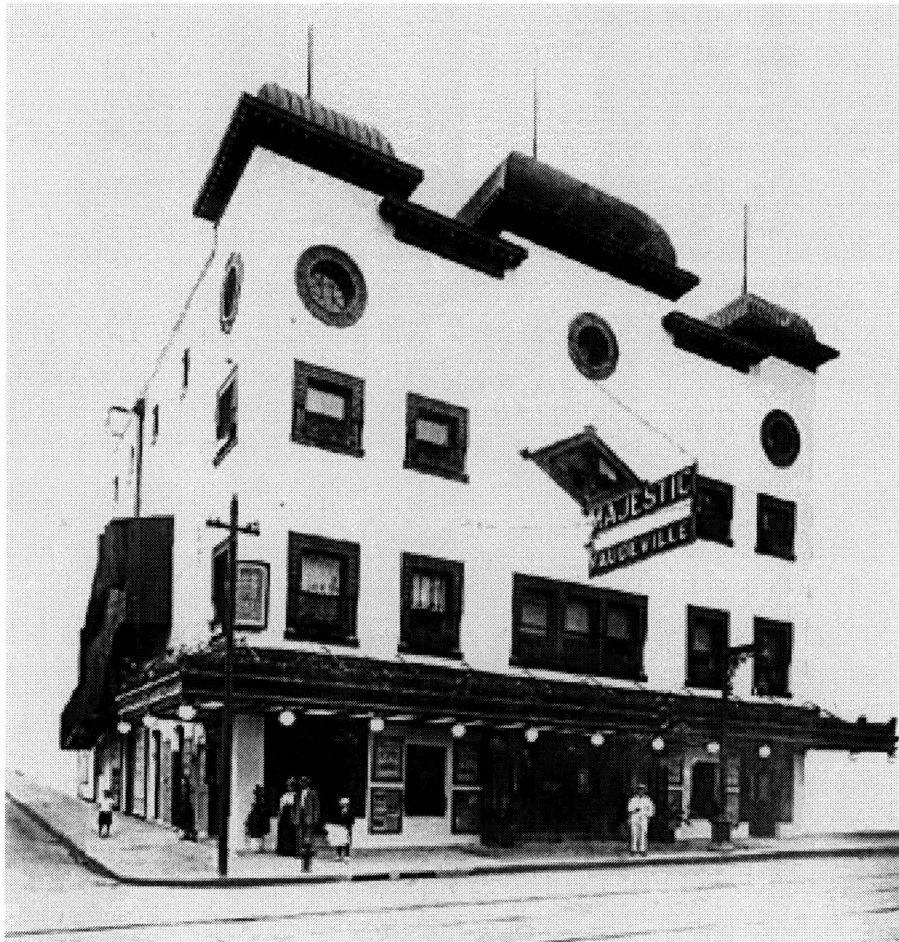
Dallas 1892

Map 4 "Amusement Row"—Elm Street



Dallas 1921-7

Photo 1 Majestic Theater, 1910



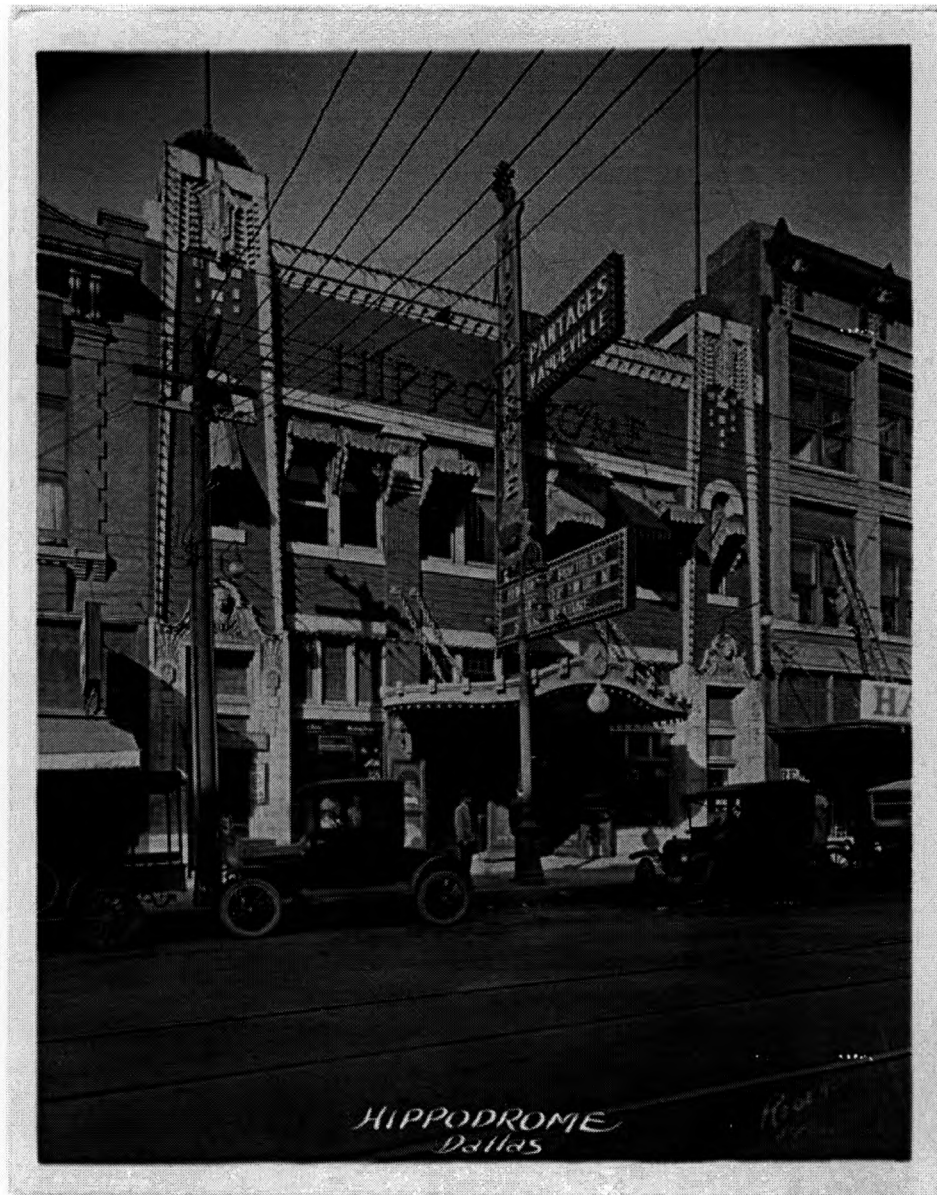
Photos courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center, Interstate Theatre Collection, Austin
Texas

Photo 2 Washington Theater, 1917



Photos courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center, Interstate Theatre Collection, Austin Texas

Photo 3 Hippodrome Theater, Circa 1920



Photos courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center, Interstate Theatre Collection, Austin
Texas

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