

FALL INTO ARTS FESTIVAL

Step Back in Time: Kennett Courthouse Square & Beyond Historical Walking Tour

The Palace and Kennett's Movie Theater History: 1896 - 2023

224 1st St.

Overview

Since its earliest days, Kennett residents have enjoyed local theaters starting with vaudeville and plays at the Opera House in the late 1800s. Moving pictures quickly followed in the form of silent films and then talkies, which ended the careers of some actors whose voices did not translate well to sound. Today, technological advances deliver not only sound, but 3-D, and the magic of digital de-aging techniques.



Alamo Theater ad from June 1916 featuring Theda Bara.

Kennett has known nearly a dozen "show houses" as they were called at the beginning of the 20th century and experienced an unbroken 105-year stream of movies until the Palace closed in 2010. It reopened in 2014 for what we hope is a very long run.

In the Beginning: The Air Dome

Air domes presented a low-cost entry into the movie business. Popular from 1905-15, they were theaters without a roof. While they had no roof, a tent might provide some rain protection, and there was usually a front façade even though they were designed to be temporary. No photos exist of Kennett's early air domes, but they could be found on S. Main, the East side of the square, and 1st Street alongside today's Palace Theater.

Silent Movies

The Opera House became the cultural center of Kennett when it opened in 1896 and was probably where the first silent films were shown. Their success inspired other businessmen to enter the game and it was not uncommon for two to three picture houses to be operating at the same time. It was a volatile industry known for a large amount of turnover in ownership and management, with one theater opened only 10 weeks before closing.

Theater Timeline

The number of movie theaters, dates, and name changes are too numerous for this space, so only highlights are included.

- **1896** The Opera House opens
- **1907** Electric Theater opens Oct. 11; closes Oct. 25
- **1909** The Alamo Air Dome opens July 16
- **1909** The Star opens Oct. 8
- **1912** The White Star is under new management
- **1915** The New Alamo opens on 1st St.
- **1917** The Palace is purchased by E.B. Vandiver
- **1927** The Star Theater opens Feb. 25
- **1927** The Palace reopens after extensive remodeling
- **1927** The Lyric Theater opens
- **1930** The Liberty Theater opens (former Lyric)
- **1930** The Ford Theater opens (former Lyric and Liberty)
- **1936** The Ritz Theater undergoes renovations
- **1937** The Palace undergoes extensive remodeling
- **1949** Tommie's Drive-In opens Aug. 19
- **1958** The Ritz closes due to smoke and water damage
- **1975** The Palace is sold to the Kerasotes chain
- **2010** AMC Kennett One (The Palace) closes Nov. 23
- **2014** The Palace reopens to a grateful community on May 30. It was brought back to life by the shared vision of Glenda Jain and Jill Mobley.

Competition Was Real

South Main Street was at one time the location of two theaters which existed side by side. Rosemary Burcham, host of the local entertainment series "Time for Talk," interviewed history enthusiast Homer Swain in 2014 to learn more about Kennett's theater history. She offered the following advice to catch a glimpse of movie history: "In your mind's eye look south from the southwest corner of the square toward Ely Walker. There, just beyond what is now a barbershop was the location of the White Star Theater and the Alamo Theater. E.B. (Earl) Vandiver was a central character in the construction of these theaters. He named his theater the "Alamo" because it resembled the Alamo, we know from Texas history. But these theaters did not remain in operation for very long."



The Palace Theater 1928.



This building housed The Star Theater in 1927. Note the windows under the eaves which could be opened to provide ventilation. The empty lot to the East of the building often hosted an air dome.



First talkie at The Palace, Jan. 10, 1930.



The Ritz Theater (second building from right) on the South side of the square, 1933.

Sources: Delta Democrat, Homer Swain.

Special thanks to the Dunklin County Genealogical Society.

