

## DeLand Residents Remember the Athens

*The following stories were collected and edited by Lucy Doll, early Athens supporter and former DeLand resident. They reveal much about the times, the town, and the theatre at the heart of it.*

### **SHENANIGANS**

Keith Allen (1997)

The kids would be wild...couldn't hear the movie. There'd be contests, people would come up to the front...once to see who could drink a bottle of soda the fastest. I could have won if it had been Mountain Dew, which I loved, but I always got Coke or Pepsi, and couldn't do it. Where the city hall annex is now, they used to have a fire truck the kids would play on. I remember the vending machine with tiny cups of RC Cola; first the cup would drop down, then the ice, then the soda.

Jim Armstrong (1995)

I remember a New Year's Eve midnight movie. The place was full. All of us kids were up in the balcony as usual. There were two guys in the first row of the balcony. One of them started in with, "Ooh, I think I'm getting sick!" Then, "Yechh!" They poured a can of vegetable soup onto rows below. People were running for the doors. There was lots of making out going on up in the balcony.

Jerry Frierson (1995)

We used to get apple cider in half gallon jugs. Mother would make burlap or flour sack bags with snaps on them, the jugs fit right in; we'd sneak it in so we wouldn't have to pay for the fountain drinks. The front of the theater was just covered with bikes. The seat cushions were made of excelsior. We'd tear it out of the seats and drop it on somebody below, they'd think it was a bug or spider landing on them.

Melanie Munshower (1996)

I remember when Steve Kaplan set his pants on fire in the lobby. He was smoking a cigar when his parents came in, so he shoved it down into his pocket. After they went in, he did a two-step over to the water fountain to put the fire out.

Richard Barnes (1997)

I remember the movies of silly races with bikes or wheelbarrows with numbers say from 1 to 8. You'd get a ticket with a number on it, and if your number in the screen race won, you'd get a free admission or a soda; once a year maybe they'd give away a bike. In junior high, two of us on cue would go out the side doors just to white out the screen. Old man Schultz would rip the tickets. He always looked mean, glowering at us probably just so we'd behave.

Bob Brown (1995)

Sometimes we'd sneak in; somebody'd go in and buy a ticket, go up to the balcony and open the north door to let others in.

George Winche (1999)

The Athens is where most of us at DeLand High School kissed our first girl. They used to rope off the balcony. But we'd have one or our buddies distract the lady at the concession stand. Drop popcorn; as soon as it hit the floor, 6 or 8 of us would jump over or duck under the rope. If we jumped, we'd miss half the time and she'd catch us. If a girl agreed to go up to the balcony with you, you knew you were gonna get kissed. You'd sit downstairs in the back row to hold hands, but when it was time, then you'd go up to the balcony. Holding hands in the theater back then was pretty cool.

### **MOMENTS IN HISTORY**

Hazel Allison (1995)

I was born in Lake County and raised in Pierson. Pearl Clark, who still lies in Pierson, would give us kids chores to do. As a reward, on Sundays she'd bundle take us to the Athens in DeLand. One Sunday, we were at her house when the radio said Pearl Harbor had been bombed. Later, we were watching the movie and Joe Fleishel stopped it and walked out on stage to tell us that Roosevelt had declared war on Japan.

Larry McKelligan (1996)

I was at the Athens when FDR died.

Roberta Morris Duvall (1997)

During the Depression, to get people to come, they'd have games like Lotto or Bingo; gave you a card when you went in. During intermission, they'd call out numbers and you'd mark your card. I never won anything but they'd give away what we now call Depression glass.

Billy Wilson (1998)

I remember the war bond premieres. People donated their talent. A \$25 bond was \$18.75. There were people singing, playing instruments.

### **PERFORMERS**

Helen Coble (1995)

I played there once; don't remember which show—toured with lots of shows. The orchestra sat in the front row because the pit wasn't large enough. I was a dancer. We stayed at the Putnam Hotel. Always had good crowds.

Ann Bell Floyd (1995)

When Sally Rand was here, I was real young. I was standing at the back of the theater with my mother and dad came up and took me and said he was going backstage for the finale. Miss Rand stood on stage with one fan up and one in front of her. She wasn't naked, she wore skintights. She moved the fan, and there I was in my beach pajamas holding her hand. My mother had a fit.

Dr. Gerald Critoph (1995)

I've lived here since 1959. I performed in the 3 plays the Athens did as dinner theater in the summer of 1978. They opened in May with *Teahouse of the August Moon*; I played Mr. Oshira. We opened in June with *The Solid Gold Cadillac*. *Summer and Smoke* played in July and we started rehearsing for *Lil Abner*. Tom Smith, chef at the Putnam restaurant, used to sneak over to the Athens to do his scenes between duties. We did 7 or 8 performances a week for a month and got \$75 a week. Food was excellent at first. Actors got supper at discount or free.

### **FLEISHEL MEMORIES**

Suzanne Neider Connery (1997)

We always splurged at the candy counter. My daughter Debbie went to the same pre-school as Tommy Fleishel—Mrs. Davis' out on East New York. He was her first love; they were 3 or 4 years old.

Gordy Pierson (1996)

The Athens was the only place back in those days to ever go. There was nothing else. Mr. Fleishel really ran a tight ship. He was a great guy. I started going there when I was 8 or 9. The Athens was the only place I ever went to with a date. My first one was Nancy, she was 9 and I was 10. It was secure then to let kids go alone.

Larry McKelligan (1996)

I took tickets at the Athens in 1943-44. My only startling memory is when I was just a kid of 16. An elderly lady asked me if I could help her friend, who seemed to be in trouble. I went in and saw her slumped over in her seat. When I pulled her up I knew she was dead. I carried her into the ladies room. Joe came up and asked me if I was alright. I must have been green in the face. The newspaper merely said that so-and-so “passed away downtown

Sally Rodes Ford (1995)

Joe Fleishel put in lots of extra hours opening for kids after the prom. Midnight show, then Kiwanis breakfast. Had a midnight show once a month. Kemp's donuts next door would stay open, too. Joe was also an artist; river scenes, bird dogs—he loved bird dogs.

Clarence “Bo” Davenport (1998)

My uncle, Robert Wyche, Sr. worked for Joe Fleishel for the Athens and the Dreka. Cleaned both, at night. I helped and so did Bobby, Robert, Jr., my cousin. So did Virginia, my aunt, and a couple of the neighborhood kids, about 3 times a week. But Bobby, Sr. was there every night. We knew Lefty Gateman, the projectionist—good friend of mine, real liberal guy. We'd come by and holler up at him and he'd let us in the fire escape.

### **THE GOOD OLD DAYS**

Ann Bell Floyd (1995)

Once a month, there'd be a cooking school for the ladies of the town. *Frierson's* used to put stoves up on the stage for the lessons. It was free. The Elks Club would have minstrel shows, Dad would let them use the theater for free. On Dish Night, they'd give away whole sets of dishes, also drawing a ticket stub. Dad trained Joe Fleishel, who became his assistant manager.

Corky Dannals (1998)

There wasn't much to do on a Friday night except go to the movies. I dated an usher, Ray Denham. He'd see me to my seat and bring me popcorn. After the show, we went to a drive-in on North Boulevard called Georgia Boys...curb service. We'd have hamburgers and chocolate milk. That was a big Friday night in DeLand in 1940-43. A big thing in the movies was the newsreel. Showed a lot of the war; brought it home, because you didn't get many pictures in the paper and of course there wasn't television.

Bill Flowers (1997)

When I was little, we couldn't afford to go to the Athens; it cost 25 or 30 cents. After the war, people had a little more money to spend, so there were little jobs you could pick up—cut lawns, do some handy work, sell some catfish. In summertime, I'd come to town a few nights a week in my daddy's car, a '41 Chevy. I'd cruise in front of the Athens and the drive-in restaurants. The Sugar Top was one.

Rachel Wimer (1995)

My mother, Ann Trezise, took tickets at the Athens for 11 or 12 years, starting maybe in 1950. She loved the kids. I was the candy girl for 5 ½ years. I remember when they put up the new marquee with the comedy/tragedy masks in the 50's, it was very exciting. Once, promoting a new western, we got on our western clothes, put bandanas over our faces and rode our horses from the Athens to downtown and 'robbed' the Barnett Bank, where they gave us fake money bags.

Norm Wedekind (1996)

Mrs. Dyer used to play the organ for silent movies, the music would follow the excitement of the movie. I worked in the ice cream factory on South Florida, where Don's Garage is now. A double scoop was worth 5 cents. When we'd see the automobile headlights coming down Florida from the Athens, we knew it'd be busy for half an hour—curb service.

Tim Tew (1999)

We moved to DeLand from Archer when I was 5. Back then, '57-'58, the only thing for us kids to do was go to movies. On Saturday if you had 6 RC Cola caps, you could get in free. There'd be movies, then some stage act, maybe a juggler, and they'd finish with cartoons. Or you'd pay 25 cents. Of course, we all drank RC Cola back then. They used to have a little raffle; you'd check your ticket number and win toys. In junior high, our band would be at the Athens for a talent show on Saturday afternoon.

Bill Dreggors (1995)

Tickets were 9 cents. If they charged 10 cents, they'd have to pay entertainment tax. Guy named Marsh was the projectionist at the Athens. They had girls selling the popcorn and peanuts. Boys were ushers. Pop Kline set up a pushcart under a tree in the park (where the new County Administration Building is now) to sell peanuts to people heading for the Athens. That cart would sit there day and night, nobody ever bothered it. He did that into the mid-50's. Kids' bikes were always left out front, never locked up' they were always still there when you came out.

Sidney Taylor (1996)

Boxing matches were popular in the Athens. There were Shakespeare's plays, Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn and their dancers, operetta's galore. Before the Stover Theater was built, some Stetson plays were at the Athens. There were lots of local shows and 'the season'--we got high class New York shows. The glory of the Athens was its staged shows, the movies were just fill-ins.

### **FILM MEMORIES**

Bill Dreggors (1995)

I've lived here all my life. My earliest memory of the Athens was seeing a silent film with my family—something about salmon fishing in Alaska. My sister read the subtitles for me. Folks used Athens as babysitter, sometimes the theater would close before parents picked up children, who would sit on sidewalk waiting. Saw Sally Rand on stage fan dancing. I was 10 at most. Thought I'd died and went to heaven.

Monso Tatum, Jr. (1996)

*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* is the first movie I remember seeing. When I was about 6, I saw *The Beast with Five Fingers* with Peter Lorre. My father claimed that he carried every brick that's in the Athens building. He was in high school then, and he did help build it.

Ann Bell Floyd (1995)

Dad came to the Athens in 1927. They hired him to wire it for sound. We had the first talking picture in DeLand. Carl Reynolds says it was *The Jazz Singer* with Al Jolson. No more silent films. The projectionists were Lefty Gateman, Red Dyer and Freddy Marsh.

James Fisher, CSP (1996)

Growing up in the Depression, I grew up in an era of great movies. They were relatively cheap to produce and they took people's minds off their miseries. For a child, one small dime was a silver token to guide him into enchanted mysteries in the dark cave of the Athens, as Greeks were once inducted into Eleusinian mysteries. In 1941, the Athens was one of the few theaters lucky enough to show *Citizen Kane*, before RKO shelved it in deference to the famed publisher William Randolph Hearst, on whose life it was—in thin disguise—based.

Mike Orr (1995)

During the late 50's, early 60's, on Saturday mornings we got in free with something like 6 RC Cola caps. There'd be a *Tarzan* movie, then *Our Gang* type kids in a crazy, silly race, like bikes versus old soapbox cars, etc. Different winner every time.

Steve Nash (1997)

I liked that we could sit through a feature more than once. We watched *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* over and over again. It cost 25 cents to get in. Florence Healy's parents sold the tickets; one sold them the other would rip them in half when you got inside.

Wayne Dreggors (1995)

The Athens was my after-school care program. I remember there were double features Sunday through Wednesday; new releases Thursday through Saturday. It was either *Ben Hur* or *The Ten Commandments* that was the first movie that ever played for a whole week.

### **INSIDE THE ATHENS**

Ann Bell Floyd (1995)

Once, Dad got the idea to upholster the inside of the theater. Sparks said fine, if you can find somebody to do it. Mother did it all, burgundy red velvet with gold thread; Dad hired men to put it on the walls. She also made the curtain—a deep navy blue. Dad was a fanatic about the theater. He made the ushers come in early and scrape off the chewing gum under the seats. There used to be a half-wall between the back row of seat and the lobby. He used to stand back there. He always had a doorman and an usher with a flashlight to show you to your seats. Talkers were put out.

Sidney Taylor (1996)

It was magic—like a fairyland there—beautiful chandeliers. The New York companies would be on their way to Miami and they stopped to play DeLand, not Daytona Beach.

Carl Ward (1999)

The Saturday movies were fun and a novelty. My shoes stuck to the floor from all the goo. As a younger child I always wondered what was behind the curtain. There just had to be someone or some evil creature just ready to grab little kids.

Lauren Mickle (1995)

When it was hot, they'd open the big doors in the back and a fan would run. In the winter, there was a wood furnace we'd stoke with 5' timbers for steam heat. The janitor would feed the furnace during the day and until 8, then the doorman would do it. They used Stetson football players for ushers. They wore two-tone blue jackets with brass buttons and bow ties.

Gary Munshower (1996)

Up behind the right box (as you're facing the stage) was the ushers' dressing room—with wooden lockers. Below that were the controls for the flats, curtain and lights. Off the left side of the stage was the 'letter room' where we kept the marquee letters. The second floor

on that side was all ventilation equipment—a blower pulling air out of the theater. There were 10 speakers behind the screen and you could see the audience through the screen from the back. The screen could move up as needed. When it was back in place, the doorman and ushers 'framed' it with black velvet to fit it for a regular movie or CinemaScope. I think the balcony held between 180-210 people; the orchestra somewhere between 460 and 520. Under the stage were three dressing rooms and the 'drawing tables where we would letter our own signs--"Coming Soon" and that sort of thing. If somebody rolled something heavy over the stage floor above us, we'd be showered with grit. The ceiling was burgundy and gold. The brocade on the walls was gold with a fern leaf pattern. The proscenium was white or cream—the footlights highlighted it. To the side was a clock lighted in purple. The water fountain had a blue light bulb in it. The projectionist had his own 'crapper' with a tiny window in it so he could watch the movie from his seat

Tim Sweeny (1996)

I remember the orchestra pit. Last time I looked you could see where they filled it in when they remodeled the theater. Had drapery around the railing.

## **PROJECTIONISTS**

Tim Sweeney (1996)

Even as a youngster, I had interest in 8mm film. I was watching Freddy splice film one day and said "I'd like to know how to do that." He said, "Well, I'll teach you." I worked as a projectionist helping Freddy and Lefty Gateman. They, not the theater, paid me. Between the two of them, they must have had 80 years there. They called him Lefty because he had polio. He built model trains up in the booth while the movies were running. Once in a while he'd get so engrossed, he'd forget to change reels and the movie would run out. Everybody would scream "Stop!" and beat the chairs. It only took 10-15 seconds to change. We used welding rods in the projector. They were so bright used with the mirror, if the booth didn't have walls, they'd light up the whole balcony. They had to be set with a pretty exact space between them to get the light right.

Rachel Wimer (1995)

My fondest memories are of the cookouts Joe Fleishel would have for the employees once a year. He was a big fisherman, and he and Lefty, the projectionist, and Fred Marsh would get the fish. They'd open up the big back doors and grill the fish and have swamp cabbage cooking in a big old pot. During the last show, all the patrons could smell the food. When the show was over, he'd pull up the screen and the employees would go up onstage and eat.