

Forward, into the Past

From Silent Films to Live Theater

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More than eighty years ago, a group of Ellenville businessmen formed the *Shurter Theatre Company* to erect a theatre which would match or exceed any in the surrounding area. The group included Silas S. and Henry J. Shurter, John Spadaro, William Soffer, and Judge William D. Cunningham.

They purchased part of Thomas J. McMullen's building on **Canal Street** (McMullen retained his gift shop and the ice cream parlor so popular with Ellenville residents) and the large rear lot. They planned to open the theatre on July 3, 1920. With no name for the enterprise, the owners held a contest for a suitable name, offering a prize of \$25. The judges were people of great stature in the area: artist George Inness of Cragmoor; Mrs. Olive Saar (later the wife of Frank Seaman) of *Yama Farms*; and merchant Silas A. VanWagener. George J. Hoornebeek, a local grocer, and ten-year-old Francis H. Lathrop (in later years president of the *Ellenville Savings Bank*) each suggested "**Shadowland**," and each received \$25.

The theatre company announced in the June 7, 1920, *Ellenville Journal* that ticket prices for movies would be 11 cents for children and 17 cents for adults, for the Wednesday and Saturday matinees; evening price would be 17 cents for all. Admission prices varied through the years and depending on the combination of films and additional entertainment. A local resident recently spoke about paying a nickel as a child in the 1930s.

The announcement promised "unobstructed vision throughout the house, with the most comfortable, full leather seats; the entire equipment are the very best that can be procured, and everything about the theatre will correspond to the refined, high-class grade of photo-plays which will be offered." Thus, did the tradition of being described as a "classic art deco theatre" begin for the **Shadowland**.

The July 3rd opening set the basic pattern for each performance: two reels of motion pictures ("shorts"), live entertainment, including comedy, dance, and/or vaudeville acts which might be by area residents, and a feature film. Gladys Silverman (later Miller) of Ellenville was described as being "graceful and pretty in a Spanish dance" at the opening. *Don't Ever Marry* was the feature film.

Only a year later, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Horton, well-respected stock company professional actors, appeared for



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one-evening-only in two comedy playlets, complementing the feature film (Ethel Clayton in *The Young Mrs. Winthrop*) and a Mutt & Jeff cartoon. Mrs. Horton had been born Rachel McCausland of the Town of Wawarsing. This was the first joint professional appearance of the couple in Ellenville "where they have a wide circle of friends and acquaintances." Two performances were given that evening, alternating the playlets, and the admission was 55 cents, including war tax.

John Spadaro and Isaac W. Millard of the *Mitchell House* purchased the **Shadowland** from the *Shurter Theatre Company* in November 1920. *The Ellenville Press* commented, "They are already arranging to advertise more extensively and to keep the public informed ahead of coming productions, which is a good thing in itself and will not fail to profit the company and give greater satisfaction to the public."

Until 1930, the famous Sunday "Blue Laws" prohibited public entertainment such as movies on Sundays. The Village Board of Trustees signed a local resolution "permitting the exhibition of motion pictures after two o'clock in the afternoon of the first day of the week" on June 25, 1930, opening the **Shadowland** to daily operation.

John Spadaro had become the sole proprietor of the **Shadowland** only three years after the opening and the theatre provided inexpensive, popular entertainment until a disastrous fire in November 1937. Spadaro immediately began renovation and the theatre reopened on December 24, 1937, still incomplete, but boasting a balcony that would seat 300 people. It was "standing room only" at the ceremonial ↗