

## THE RIALTO THEATER

*The fact is, I am quite happy in a movie,  
even a bad movie. Other people, so I have  
read, treasure memorable moments in their  
lives.*

..Walker Percy

Given that Renovo was such a small town, it had a first-rate movie theater. The Rialto, which was owned and operated by George McFadden, was ornate, spacious, and clean. It was also the site of many memorable moments...some of which even occurred on the screen.

The Rialto always had the best of the first-run movies. Specifically, my friends and I saw *Shane*, *The Robe*, *South Pacific*, *Ben-Hur*, *On the Waterfront*, *From Here to Eternity*, *Stalag 17*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Elmer Gantry*, and *West Side Story* at the Rialto. Truth be told, though, Ma and Pa Kettle, Tarzan, Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Francis the Talking Mule, Abbott and Costello, Jerry Lewis, the Three Stooges, the Bowery Boys, and Looney Tunes cartoons were more our speed.

But regardless of the on-screen kiss-kiss, bang-bang, or ha-ha, the real action was, of course, in the audience, where we kids were busy being, well, kids. We had greetings to exchange, tidbits of gossip to share, attention to grab, and patrons to pester...not to mention candy, Cokes, and popcorn to get stoked on.

Speaking of the Rialto's candy, some of the snack-bar confectioneries were used by Renovo's adolescent moviegoers to satisfy their sweet tooth and some were used to harass. My buddies, for instance, felt that Jujubes, Milk Duds, NECCO Wafers, Chuckles, Junior Mints, Jujufruits, Mallo Cups, and Raisinets were for eating and that Boston Baked Beans were for pelting kids who had the nerve to try to pay attention to the movie. It was hard to argue with my buddies' logic. Which is to say, the size, the specific gravity, and the mediocre taste of Boston Baked Beans made them ideal for lobbing grenade-style (from below backrest level, natch) toward kids who were behaving in an unkidlike manner a few rows closer to the screen.

There was really no end to the creative things that kids did to annoy other patrons. Some tore the tabs off one end of empty Jujubes boxes and blew through them, which made an awful screeching noise that lasted until the boxes got spit-soggy. Others chose to flatten their popcorn boxes and launch them sidearm toward the screen on cue, forming a fast-moving flotilla of faux Frisbees.

Sometimes one would even unintentionally disrupt someone's movie-watching by engaging in relatively innocent conversation. Case in point: I once tried to impress a date with "I'm ambidextrous." I can eat popcorn with either hand." The couple sitting behind us

at the time somehow found my remark wildly funny and couldn't stop laughing. The merciless Rialto usher soon showed up and threatened to throw them out. Even after the couple was forced to move a few aisles away, I could hear them trying to stifle their giggles.

In retrospect, the Rialto was a veritable bargain. For 30 cents—10 cents for admission to the matinee, 10 cents for a bag of popcorn, and 5 cents each for a box of candy and a soda—we got the complete movie-theater experience. (It goes without saying that the shenanigans were gratis.)

And once, some kids unexpectedly got more—a whole lot more—for their money. The phenomenon was given various names, but as my cousin Charles Barnum tells it, the Miracle on Fifth Street (a.k.a. the Great Gusher) occurred one Saturday when he paid a routine visit to the soda machine while the previews were on. (Note: The Rialto's soda machine was in a hallway adjacent to the theater's anteroom and was of the cup-drops-down-and-gets-filled-after-you-put-your-nickel-in-the-slot variety.) Anyway, Charles put his nickel in the slot and pressed the button to select his preferred soda. The cup dutifully dropped down, and the machine filled his cup...and then kept on dispensing soda!

Charles, sensing he'd hit the mother lode, downed the soda and put the cup back in for a refill—and then another and another and another, changing flavors on the fly. After Charles drank his fill, he raced back into the theater to get his moviegoing goombahs, who, of course, immediately came pouring out of the auditorium en masse. Some of them started to rummage through the waste can for used cups to fill, but others who apparently were more anxious to slake their thirst simply cupped their hands under the great gusher and started guzzling like they'd just crossed the Sahara.

When the incredulous quaffers saw George McFadden coming their way a couple minutes later, they tried to block his view of the soda machine and act nonchalant at the same time. Alas, it didn't work. George heard the soda draining from the machine and put the kibosh on the Big Drink.

Riding high one minute, reprimanded the next—such was life in the adolescent subculture of the Rialto Theater.