

Bulk Rate  
U.S. Postage  
Paid  
Permit No. 42  
Swansea, MA

Postal Customer

Newspaper Advertising  
Gets The Job Done!



# SOUTHCC

The Herald News

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2007

VOLUME 5, NUMBER 48

The Herald News

*Memories of*

## MAIN STREET

### REMEMBER WHEN?

It's not too late to record your memories of historic downtown Fall River for The Herald News' and the Fall River Historical Society's "Memories of Main Street" project. Log on to:  
[blogs.townonline.com/main\\_street](http://blogs.townonline.com/main_street)

# Dim the lights, roll the film

Majestic theaters lent a sense of elegance to downtown



# Dim the lights, roll the film

Majestic theaters lent a sense of elegance to downtown

MARC MUNROE DION  
HERALD NEWS STAFF REPORTER

In 1934, if you had a piece of cardboard in your shoe to cover the hole, if you had no hot water in your apartment, if you ate more beans than you did meat and if you could scrape up a bit of small change, you went to the movies.

You entered the lobby of the Durfee Theater and you stood for a moment looking at the gilt, the columns, the ornamental fish pond, the uniformed staff, the lights in the lobby, the whole thing modeled after Spain's Alhambra Palace and you felt better for a couple hours, comforted, amused, treated like gentry by the well-spoken people selling candy in the lobby.

Not every year was as dark as '34, but the great movie houses that lined the streets of Fall River's downtown always provided a lot more than just movies.

And they weren't small-time places, either. From 1929 to 1971, the Durfee sold an estimated 15 million tickets. Maurice Chevalier



film of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation. "Bonzo Goes to College," a movie about a matriculating monkey, was on the bill with Her Majesty's

All was not smut, either. In 1880, one went to The Academy to hear world-traveler John L. Stoddard give lectures about his

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE  
FALL RIVER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

△ The Academy Building on South Main was once home to the Academy Theatre, one of several that

94, but the great movie houses that lined the streets of Fall River's downtown always provided a lot more than just movies.

And they weren't small-time places, either. From 1929 to 1971, the Durfee sold an estimated 15 million tickets. Maurice Chevalier played the Durfee. The Durfee boasted more than 2,000 seats, the Capitol offered 1,500 seats and the Center Theater was designed after the Cinema de La Cour, in Paris. Inside the Center were two 30-foot-high murals, one representing War and the other Peace.

In 1940, the best seat in the house at the Center was 44 cents. The Center would close in 1977, toward the end of the holocaust decade for Fall River movie palaces.

Even in 1953, two bits would get you into The Embassy, another downtown theater then showing a

film of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation. "Bonzo Goes to College," a movie about a matriculating monkey, was on the bill with Her Majesty.

The Plaza Theater did business in downtown Fall River, too, and in the Twenties called itself "The Home of High Class Photoplays." In those days, a "photoplay" was a movie.

And sometimes in the early part of the last century, the Academy Theatre hosted Charmion, who might have been called a stripper but whose act involved little of what we think of as "stripping," though contemporary newspaper accounts note she "dropped her garter upon the bald heads of her admirers."

All was not smut, either. In 1880, one went to The Academy to hear world-traveler John L. Stoddard give lectures about his time in France.

The Academy billed itself as "Fall River's Most Intimate Theater" and by the 1950s was boasting, not just air-conditioning, but "scientific" air conditioning.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Bijou put on a lot of live plays including, in 1931, "Passion Play," the story of Christ's death. The stage show at the Bijou was aided by German actors who performed in that country's centuries-old passion plays.

Forget not the Savoy, either. In 1913, that theater offered up a musical revue happily called "50 Miles from Boston," which promised, and must have delivered, "Pretty Chorus Girls."

The great theaters lasted for years, into the 1970s.

A picture from 1961 shows downtown as it was and as its theaters were.

The marquee at The Empire Theater advertises "Blue Hawaii," an Elvis Presley movie released in 1961. McWhirr's department store is open for business almost across the street.

In the not-very-distant distance are signs for W.T. Grant, Kresge's and Woolworths. Display windows for smaller shops line the street.

It wouldn't last much longer. By the 1970s, the last of the great theaters were closing.

Television had won.

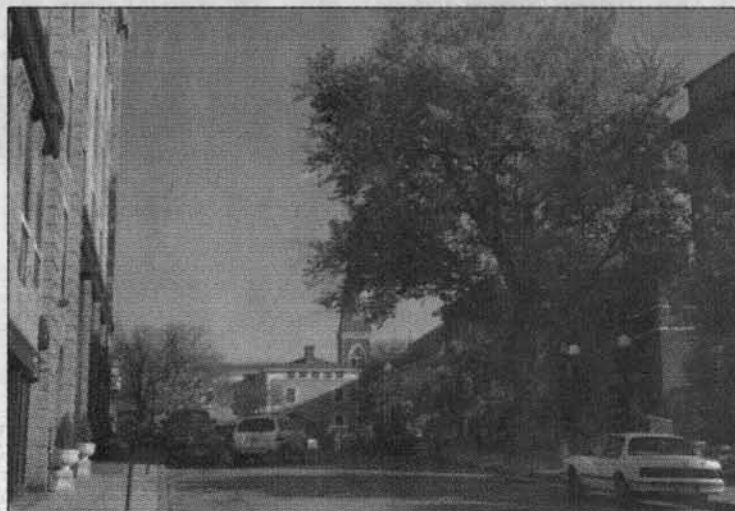
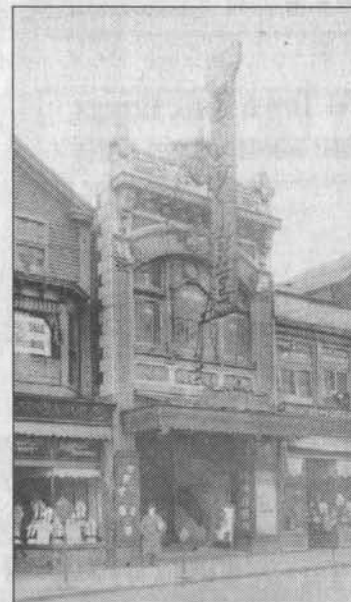
E-MAIL MARC MUNROE DION AT  
MDION@HERALDNEWS.COM

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE  
FALL RIVER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

△ The Academy Building on South Main was once home to the Academy Theatre, one of several that called downtown Fall River home in the golden age of motion pictures.

◁ In a building that originally housed Sheedy's Vaudeville Theatre, The Empire operated from 1918 until about 1963. It was next door to the Bijou and across the street from Adam's Book Store.

The Empire, on South Main, featured Elvis Presley in "Blue Hawaii" during the 1961 holiday season. ▽



## Then & Now

HERALD NEWS PHOTO | DAVE SOUZA  
North Main Street, looking up the  
road from Elm Street.