



Staff Photo by John Freeman

For the patrons — a last picture show.

From Jazz Singer to . . . *End of the Game*

By JON ROE
Staff Writer

The Wichita Sunday Eagle

Now it had come to this.

Its wooden marquee and dirty whitewash front squeezed between Mel's Beauty Boutique and the Uptown Recreation Hall . . . an East Douglas derelict, down at the heels and unable to get up.

At least, that was the impression from the outside.

Yet, inside . . . past Gayle Powell who sat bored in the ticket booth and sold eight tickets to the 7:30 show . . . past assistant managers Mike Laffoon and Tusten Houchin who stood at the door and discussed movies . . . past concession stand attendant John Campbell who dumped pre-popped corn into its bin . . .

Past all that, there was indisputable grandeur. It may have been out of place and out of time, but it was as though — on its last night in operation — the 48-year-old Uptown Theater had sucked in its gut and said, "One last time."

From the balcony, five aisles stretched toward Kansas' largest movie screen, like long, straight fingers of a hand that cradled the pagoda-roofed concession stand in its palm.

Eight-hundred-thirty-two empty seats faced the screen. On either side, once-bright art patterns lined the walls. In the blue ceiling, tiny lights twinkled.

The air conditioning whined and grumbled in vain and, in the projection booth, Bill York skinned off his shirt and prepared the giant projectors for the final film, a B picture called "The End of the Game."

Up front, behind the massive screen, artwork crawled along the walls, stage flats hung from the ceiling, a dressing room stood dark, rat poison on the floor. On the elaborate light box were scratched names and dates . . .

Jack Layne, 1933.

Dale Kullmann, 1941.

Luther Quinn, 1945.

Small, neat scratches of men who thought their names would remain forever.

Secret rooms and wooden stairways bear witness to what once was alive with noise, color, glamor. And one could almost hear it, see it, feel it.

By showtime, eight persons had bought tickets. A couple of young guys down front, two middle-aged couples halfway down and two lovers necking in the balcony.

York cut the lights and the final night at the Uptown began.

It had come to this.

Yet — in that instant, that catch of the breath between the moment when the lights die and the screen comes to life — it was possible Tuesday night to span the 48 years.

It was possible to imagine elegant men and beautiful women with pro-

The Grandeur
Of The
UPTOWN
DOUGLAS AT HILLSIDE

Surpasses Old World Beauty

Greetings and a Hearty Welcome
From The New Uptown Theatre

A significant chapter in the social and business history of Wichita has begun. A good suburban theatre is socially an institution and commercially an asset to the community it serves.

In the UPTOWN you will find a splendid structure, a theater unsurpassed artistically, architecturally and mechanically. And you may feel confident that the atmosphere of refinement you now discern will always be found here. We believe our knowledge of your tastes and desires has enabled us to select entertainment worthy of your patronage. In dedicating this theater to you and in extending our most cordial welcome, we want you to feel that this is YOUR theater and will be operated and maintained for your recreation and enjoyment.

MAY THE GREATEST PLEASURE OF IT ALL BE YOURS
The Management

The UPTOWN THEATER
Opens Monday, July 16th

Opening ad — July 15, 1928.

hibition gin on their breath and merriment on their minds, on opening night.

July 16, 1928 . . .

The Palace Theater was showing Charlie Chaplin in "The Circus." The Miller featured "Street of Sin" with Emil Jannings and Fay Wray.

But there was only one place to be that night — at Wichita's first suburban theater, the newest, greatest and one of the largest theaters in the Midwest.

All those beautiful people had just seen the stage show (Harry Hunt's Imperial Stage Band backing "five acts of high class vaudeville") and were now — in that pause between the darkness and the light — waiting for the first talking movie, "The Jazz Singer" with Al Jolson, to explode upon the screen.

An ad in the July 15, 1928, edition of The Wichita Sunday Eagle proclaimed that "the suburban theater has come to stay."

"In the Uptown you will find a splendid structure, a theater unsurpassed artistically, architecturally and mechanically. And you may feel confident that the atmosphere of refinement you now discern will always be found here."

It lived up to its billing, showing not just talkies, but the first Cinerama

films and, later, the 70-millimeter versions of such classics as "Gone With the Wind."

But this is 1976. And Tuesday night the 85-foot screen struggled with a pretentious talky film of poor quality and worse sound.

The eight patrons left after the first show and were replaced by eight more. Gayle sold the last ticket and said goodbye.

Today, workmen were scheduled to begin tearing out the projection equipment and screen for use elsewhere.

The future of the Uptown is uncertain. It may be leased or it may be torn down.

But Tuesday night from 7:30 to 11:10, the old theater performed in spite of its marquee, sparking memory and imagination back to a time when it wasn't out of place, but the very essence of things.

At 11:10 Tuesday, the eight patrons and remaining staff filed out of the Uptown, heading in different directions into the night.

Jon Walker, left alone, walked one more time around the spacious theater, up the long aisles, checking the exits against any intrusion.

Before heading into the night himself, he took one look back at that "splendid structure," that "unsurpassed atmosphere of refinement," then turned off the lights for good.