

## BACK IN TIME

# Lansdale Theatre's rise and fall



## For a half-century, it was the region's movie palace

By **DICK SHEARER**

Hindsight is 20-20. Monday morning quarterbacks throw no incomplete passes. Second-guessing counts for nothing.

Choose the cliché and it probably can be applied to the Lansdale Theatre which disappeared from the local scene 33 years ago. At the time of its demise, it seemed few people cared what happened to the town's most elegant movie house. Today, with all the talk about a failed performing arts center, residents with long memories wish we had another chance to save the old entertainment palace.

The Lansdale Theatre, located at W. Main St. and Towamencin Ave., was the second to bear that name. The first, erected in 1922 on Courtland Street near Railroad Avenue, was the brainchild of Edward F. Burrow and a group of investors.

The original Lansdale was the first theater in town that was built to show

motion pictures. It was boom time for silent films. The Courtland Street building was impressive enough but it came with two flaws that Burrow recognized early on: It lacked a presence on Main Street and it was exclusively a theater – there was no provision for storefronts or offices to bring in revenue when the projector wasn't rolling.

Burrow observed that the business district was spreading westward so he and his investors quickened the pace by constructing a new theater, which came to be one of the most elaborate in the Philadelphia suburbs.

It opened on March 5, 1928, to rave reviews. There wasn't much to dislike. The Spanish architectural style was all the rage in that era. The theater boasted 999 seats (one more would push it into a higher tax bracket), as well as a marble and Mercer Tile-enhanced lobby with a wall fountain. There were

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THE NEW  
**LANSDALE THEATRE**  
Main Street at Towamencin Avenue

**Opens Monday, March 5**

With Norma Talmadge in  
**"THE DOVE"**

Two Shows: 6.45 and 8.45. Admission 50c to all

Starting Wednesday with Clara Bow in "GET YOUR MAN"  
ADMISSIONS: 35c FOR ADULTS, 25c FOR CHILDREN  
No Children in Arms Admitted Except Saturday Matinee

# In the end, time wasn't on theatre's side

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beautifully inlaid doors with intricate glass that opened to the main auditorium. The walls were adorned with sconces and heavily-detailed reliefs. A massive pipe organ was one of the dominant elements but the centerpiece was the huge chandelier that hung from the middle of the arched roof.

Opening night was a Hollywood-style by-invitation-only gala. In the best tradition of the Roarin' 20s, the crowd was dressed to the nines for a showing of Norma Talmadge starring in *The Dove*.

The only negative was the fact that the Lansdale's sound equipment was back-ordered, making it necessary to feature silent films at a time when talkies were becoming the rage. Need we mention that *The Dove* was a bomb and Talmadge's career faded when she actually had to talk on screen.

That notwithstanding, the Lansdale Theatre quickly became the town's entertainment showplace. It eclipsed the older Music Hall, which was smaller and built in the 1880s for stage productions before being converted to a movie house.

The popularity of the building was not limited to the theater itself. Bitner's Pharmacy occupied one of the adjacent retail spots and was home to a soda fountain. What better place to hang out before and after the show?

The Lansdale thrived through the Depression years, World War II and the 1950s population boom. During that time, two names were synonymous with its success: Burrow and projectionist John Comfort, who was on board for four decades.



The beginning of the end came in 1964 when Burrow, then 82, died unexpectedly. His passing coincided with the arrival of the first multiplex theaters which were being built along highways – not downtown – with ample parking surrounding them.



**CINEMASCOPE** debuted in 1953 with the release of "The Robe", 10 years in the making, two years in production, with a cast of thousands.

Slowly the Lansdale Theatre's crowds declined. Without Burrow, first-run films were more difficult to obtain and necessary building maintenance was deferred by a succession of owners.

Even live concerts with up-and-coming talent like Barry Manilow and Hall and Oates couldn't right the ship.

First Federal Savings and Loan Association, located in the same block, owned the property in the mid-1970s and wanted to expand into the space occupied by the theater. By all accounts, the bankers had mixed feelings and a soft spot for the theater. They gave the community one last chance to support it by turning out in large numbers for a classic film series. On most nights, only a few dozen folks showed up, most to take a final look around before the walls were brought down. It sealed the theater's fate.

In 1979, a demolition crew reduced the movie house to memories. Ironically only two years later, the people of Glenside reached the conclusion that their theater, the Keswick, could be retrofitted for big-name live acts. But in Lansdale it was too late.