

## Historic Moment in Arkansas Essay

The Center Theater is actually the only surviving movie theater in downtown Little Rock. The Center Theater was built in 1948 and 1949; it took the place of an older theater at the same location. When Center Theater opened it became the North Little Rock/Little Rock area's nineteenth single screen movie theater with two drive-ins and a theater catering to black residents. Center Theater was one of eight movie theaters in downtown Little Rock and one of five on Main Street. When the theater closed in 1977, it was the last movie theater left on Main Street and next to last in downtown Little Rock. Today Center Theater is downtown Little Rock's only survivor from the pre-TV period of the "silver screen". Center Theater's unchanged late 1940's building and remaining art modern-influenced interior make it able to stay in the society with local significance.

The first movie to be played in Center Theater was the world premiere of *Adventure in Baltimore*, starring Robert Young, Shirley Temple, and John Agar. The Theater had a nice spacious lobby, a large concession stand, and drinking fountains which the audience really enjoyed. The Center Theater had a seating of 1,252 seats. Center Theater was the bigger and better replacement of the old Royal Theater which was constructed in 1912 and according to the *Arkansas Democrat*; a workman began to dismantle the old Royal Theater in 1948. The Royal Theater was designed by the firm Sanders and Frank Ginocchio, which later became the firm of Ginocchio and Cromwell who designed the Center Theater.

Despite its modern theme the Center Theater soon became part of a dying breed. It arrived just a few years before TV began taking the audience from the movie theaters. The Little Rock/North Little Rock's single screen movie theaters starting to close in the 1950's and by 1959 nine of the theaters that had opened just ten years ago were gone. But in the 1960's the new multi screen theaters took back the audiences from the single screen theaters. The Center Theater was not taken down because its size continued to be an attractive venue for blockbuster movies, such as *The Exorcist*. When Center Theater finally closed its doors for good in 1977, it was the last theater on Main Street.

Even though only small parts of its interior design survive today, the Center Theater's exterior is in very good condition and mostly intact.

I can picture myself 61 years ago in bustling downtown Little Rock on the Main Street sidewalk and walking past what is now known as a historic place in Arkansas. I stop and look up at the sign to see what's playing at Center Theater and walk inside to a crowd of people. A man is working at the concession stand handing out popcorn and drinks, and everyone is excited to see the movie. I see people talk and discuss the movie and children bouncing up and down and

they hand in their tickets. It's sad to think that Center Theater went from a lively exciting place to an empty building that is simply unnoticed.

Source

Hooper, S.E. *et al.* (2007). *Arkansas History for Young People*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Univ. of Arkansas Press