Joseph T. (Ted) Francis (1900-1999)

Before his death at age ninety-eight on June 30, 1999, Joseph "Ted" Francis was dean of Oregon's single-screen cinemas. A slight man who shunned retirement, Francis spent decades climbing the well-worn carpeted stairs of the historic Cameo Theater in Newberg. "I don't drink or chase women," he often laughed. "This is my life." Francis's career—and his memory—spanned much of Oregon's movie theater history, from silent films to digitally enhanced Surround Sound.

Francis, born on September 12, 1900, was a descendent of pioneer Jesse Applegate on his mother Catherine's side. After the death of his father, Yusef Fransous Bermoxes, in 1915, he left high school to help run the family farm near Drain. In his teens, Francis caught sight of a projectionist in town hand-cranking a machine that flashed moving picture images on a storefront wall. "The man asked me if I wanted to try it for a few minutes, and I swallowed the bait," said Francis. "My arm was tired when he came back, but I was hooked."

In 1920, Francis drifted over to Yoncalla and struck a bargain with the high school principal: he would return to classes if he could show films at night in the auditorium. By the end of the year, he had passed his classes and earned enough money to purchase an electric generator and film projector to take on the road. His appearance in some towns was like the arrival of the circus. People lined up, their dimes in hand, to see their first motion pictures at community centers, lodge halls, schools, and church basements.

By 1926, Francis was tired of traveling and moved to Newberg to take over the Star Theater. He needed a piano player for his silent movies, and that is how he found Grace Heater. They were married the next year, and they remained together for over seventy years. "I got a great deal—a piano player and a wife," Francis said.

Francis next purchased the Baker Theater in 1927, renaming it the Francis Theater. During the Depression, he promoted Bank and Country Store nights, featuring cash and grocery giveaways. "People often lined up around the block for a chance to win," he said. When attendance dropped off, he closed the Star Theater.

His only competition came in 1937, when MGM opened the 300-seat Cameo Theater in the heart of Newberg. For two years, Francis battled the movie giant for customers. He won out, in part, because he always insisted on first-run films and met each week with film distributors in Portland to ensure the best bookings.

In 1939, when the Cameo faltered, Francis purchased it, and the theater became his second home for the next sixty years. To attract customers, he installed rocking chair and loge seats and chose films that he believed reflected community tastes. "I've never had much use for films with lots of swearing, violence or sex," he said. "A good story will always bring people in."

To keep up with movie fans with families, Francis built the 99W Drive-In, just east of Newberg, in 1953, where it remains as the last operating outdoor theater in Oregon. He added the Twin Cinemas next door in 1983.

As Francis neared his hundredth year, Newberg residents and business leaders led a fund-raising drive and persuaded the city to rename the block where he opened his first theater Francis Square.

Written by Joe Fitzgibbon

Further Reading:

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