

The history of Augusta theatres

Augusta Historical Society and Museum

We continue sharing historical essays written by Miss McDaniel's 1973-79 Methods in Research Class. Following is the History of Augusta Theaters written by Dana Sills. Her essay is shared with minimal editing.

The History of Theatres in Augusta

In 1907, Mr. R. A. Haines and Mr. W. H. Rudy bought a building located at 516 State Street. They decided to turn it into a theatre for plays and different programs and called it the 'Nickelodeon'. It only stayed in business a short time, for one year later, Howard Dull bought the business from Haines and Rudy. He moved it to 119 East 5th Street and it was then called the 'Idle Hour'. Later on, it was moved to a new location at 511 State Street. (At this time, the Opera House was located in the upstairs portion of 119 E. 5th.)

In 1910 Mr. Will Rhodes established another theatre. Since the 'Idle Hour' was no longer at 119 East 5th, he started his new business at that location. After only 2 years of operation, Rhode's theatre was closed and the 'Idle Hour' remained the only theatre in town until 1916. George Smith and Frank Yates built a new theatre then and named it the 'Isis'. This new building was located at 521 State. Several people became interested in the theatre business in 1916 and as a result both theatres changed owners several times in the next few years.

In 1922 the 'Liberty' movie theatre was built. It was located at 414 State. There were 3 theatres in Augusta for a short time but the 'Liberty' closed less than a year after it was built. The original owner of this theatre is not known, nor is the reason for its closing known. Mr. D. A. Bisagno had been the owner of the 'Isis' since the year 1918. He took a great deal of interest in the constructing of the 'Liberty' and purchased it just a few months before it was closed.

In the meantime, Mr. Jack Johnson had purchased the 'Mecca' theatre, located in the building which is now the north half of Cooper Drug Store. This theatre had formerly been known as the 'Idle Hour'. This building, however, closed approximately 3 years after the 'Liberty' leaving only one theatre in the town of Augusta.

Many years had gone by with silent movies being the main form of entertainment in the theatre houses. The breakthrough came in 1923 and the sound movies started taking over. The 'Isis' gladly welcomed this. The type of sound that was



The Augusta theatre is a brightly lit center for the downtown scene on many nights. Photo by Nikole Babb.

first used in the movies was singers. Some very famous singers passed through the town for this purpose, including jazz singer, Al Jolson. Later, they started using Vitaphone systems. There was an older model of what we call 'records' today. It was not until 1931, that Western Electric Sound System installed 'sound on film' in the theatre.

Since more and more modern equipment was being used, the 'Isis' was attracting many people. The biggest percent of these was the younger set. Many of the youth would go to the show as much as 3 times a week. Usually Sunday afternoon, Tuesday evenings, and Friday evenings were the popular times. At that time, twelve cents was the admission fee to the theatre. One bag of popcorn cost 5 cents; soft drinks cost only a nickel. Licorice and other small items were still a penny. A person could go to the movies, buy a bag of popcorn, a soda and 3 pieces of licorice for the price of a small soft drink today! (The 'Isis' known by the younger set as the 'Cowboy Show', because cowboy serials were shown. The installments were shorter than a regular movie, much as TV serials are today.)

With more people taking an interest in the theatres every day, Augusta was in great need of much larger and better facilities. In 1934, Mr. D. A. Bisagno, along with his wife, Aline, announced their plans for meeting this need. They planned to build a brand-new theatre in the town. Construction began that same year. The thousand square feet of structural glass was made especially for the theatre to be placed on the front of the building and was the only theatre in the Midwest with a front of this type. Well over a mile of pipe was used in the building for the refrigeration system. Custom made doors were put in along with a hand painted ceiling. A special artist, all the way from Holland, came to do all of the plaster work and painting. They had this done in order to try to copy Egyptian art.

The 'Augusta' theatre was



Mr. D. A. Bisagno's wife, Aline.

the very first in the world to use neon illumination for this type of business. If the neon tubes that were used in the display and indirect lighting were placed end on end, they would be as long as five city blocks. Four hundred yards of carpet were used for the aisles and the lobby. In the new building, restrooms were installed adjacent to the lobby. This was done to save the embarrassment of the people attending the theatre. Kids of the town who went to the 'Isis' regularly had a habit of leaving the toilet door open so they would not miss the show. Everything was done to help prevent this in the new theatre. Mr. Bisagno spent \$70,000 on the new building but felt it was well worth it. It took no time at all to put it to use.

On June 19, 1935 the formal opening of the 'Augusta' theatre took place. The owners received telegrams from famous actors and actresses all over the United States, such as Jean Harlow, Wallace Berry, Clark Gable, and Joan Crawford. Alf Landen, who was governor of Kansas, Louis B. Mayer, president of MGM productions at that time, and many others, also sent their congratulations. All of these were read at the ceremony that day. Later, they were posted on the billboard in the lobby of the new building. State Street was closed that day for the event and the Elks Band paraded to the front of the theatre and gave a short concert. Clyde Gibson, the mayor of Augusta, Harvey Smith, the president of the Chamber of Commerce, and Clovis Cash, representative of Augusta's civic clubs, were present and



Mr. D. A. Bisagno owned the Isis theatre before purchasing the Liberty in the early 1900's.

they gave congratulatory speeches.

The entertainment for the day consisted of 3 musical numbers. The Carr twins started the program with a dance number. A violin trio was next with Lenn Tibbetts, Virginia Tibbetts, and Phyllis Prigmore. Finishing the program with what most said to be the highlight of the whole ceremony, Roberta Jean Konga, Mr. Bisagno's sister-in-law, sang 'Ah! Sweet Mystery of Life'. It was a beautiful ceremony and so many flowers were given that they covered the stage and the entire front of the auditorium. Mr. J. H. Kelley, president of National Theatre Supply Company of New York City, said, 'Augusta is one of the best equipped theatres in the United States.' The theatre was described by theatre owners throughout the country as, 'the finest in the Midwest'.

Mr. Bisagno's business not only served the public very well, but charities were also included in his service. October 19, 1943, he donated all of the proceeds of that day to the Army Relief Fund. The movie, 'This is the Army' was shown to help bring in money. Later, that same year, D. A. and Aline used the lobby of their building to sell war bonds. Pictures were put up of men in the army and letters and free passes were given to servicemen. The Bisagno's were awarded the First American Citizenship Award by the Augusta V. F. W. Post for their efforts.

In 1945, a new ticket booth and sound system was installed. The new improvements did not last

Obituaries

DANNY MCHATTON

Our family man left this plain to join his sweetheart in the ever-after at the age of 78 on June 10th, 2025, in San Antonio. Danny McHatton was a devoted husband, a proud father of 2, and a rascally middle child of 3.

He came from humble beginnings with a large extended family growing up in the small town El Dorado, Kansas. He was a young lifeguard, high school wrestling champ, and most honorably, a Major in the Air Force. He touched soil in all 50 states and a handful of countries around the world, retiring and spending his golden years in Texas.

He never ran out of mischief whether creating fun party games, scary haunted houses, or covert rubber band gun operations. He loved being outdoors and was always engineering some project or 20! He was ever the provider for his family and provided many adventures and life stories we will forever share in his memory.

He is survived by his brother, Mike McHatton; son, Robert McHatton; daughter, Chris McHatton; granddaughters, Shyanne & Aralynn; and great-grandchildren; Remington & Lyla. Danny is preceded in death by his beloved wife, Alyson McHatton; father, Leo McHatton; sister, Karen Kester; and mother, Nina McHatton.

A Memorial Service will be held on Sunday, July 13, 2025, at 1:00 p.m. at Porter Loring Mortuary North, 2102 North Loop 1604 East, San Antonio, TX 78232.

Military Honors & Interment will be held on Monday, July 14, 2025, at 1:30 p.m. at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery, 1520 Harry Wurzbach Rd, San Antonio, TX 78209.

In honor of all his furry friends over the years, but especially his Rascal, in lieu of flowers please donate to SNIPSA <https://share.google/WzPejGMspHHsfh0BK> You are invited to sign the Guestbook at www.porterloring.com Arrangements with PORTER LORING MORTUARY NORTH 2102 N. LOOP 1604 E SAN ANTONIO, TX 78232 - (210) 495-8221



long, though, for on July 18, 1949 a fire broke out in the theatre. It started in the upper right-hand corner of the auditorium. Firemen came in through the ceiling. They cut 6 holes and used 6 hoses to put out the flames. They got to the fire in time so the damage was mainly caused by smoke and water. There was so much water that it ruined just about everything. It was seen flowing out of the front door. A definite estimate is not known about the price of the damage, but it completely ruined the ceiling, floor, side panels, seats, drapes and everything. The Bisagno's had to start from the beginning and remodel the complete interior of the building. Restoration of the building started the day after the fire. By October 21, 1949 the 'Augusta' theatre was again open and back in business. It started once more with an original beauty show, 'It's a Great Feeling'.

The 'Isis' theatre, although not as popular as the 'Augusta' theatre was

still in business. In 1950, it was rebuilt and redecorated. The next year, Mr. Bisagno felt a drive-in theatre would be very successful, so he built one north of Augusta. On May 14, 1952 the drive-in theatre was opened (on land that is now occupied by White Eagle Credit Union). Shortly afterwards, the 'Isis' closed. It could no longer afford to stay open. The first movie ever shown at the new drive-in was 'the First Time'. Throughout the next few years several improvements were made in the theatre, (to include screens, sound systems, and air conditioning systems).

For over 50 years, the Bisagno Family were connected to the theatres in Augusta. Before he retired, Mr. Bisagno said that he felt it had been worthwhile and would not trade his years in the theatre business for anything. Miss Sills ended her essay by saying that it was a known fact that there may be larger theatres than Augusta's but there is definitely none better. Augustans would agree.

How can you live God’s idea of community?

Matt Schaffner, Senior Pastor
El Dorado First Baptist Church

Community. It's a word that conjures thoughts, images, and emotions. Maybe it's a parade rolling down Main St., supporting the high school sports team and that pride in performance, the idea of an old school barn raising, or the heroic efforts of first responders in a crisis- however amazing thoughts the word "community" might gather, falls far short of God's idea of community.

In Acts 2, we see what God's idea of community looks like:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles. Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with joyful and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were

being saved." (Acts 2.42-47 CSB)

Notice the words used to describe God's community. Devoted, awe, together, joyful and sincere, favored. The foundation of God's community here is devotion to the Word, prayer, togetherness, shared meals, generosity, and shared care. I cannot read these words and think that kind of community is what I want to live in! Sharing life matters because we cannot do it alone, but God's community is founded on who God is and spills out from there. Everything they are doing is the overflow (and instruction of God!) of their transformed hearts.

If you think about the community you live in,

are these characteristics of that community? If they're not, here's the challenge: what can you do to help make it look more like that? God didn't call us to do life alone- so how can you live into God's community God's way? A simple start is founding your life in God's Word and prayer, but that cannot stand alone, it is coupled with "fellowship" and "breaking of bread." Don't settle for something less- than the fullness of what God has given us- a community founded in Him that loves each other like He loved us. So go live in community doing things God's way- together, in love- and see what happens.

BUTLER COUNTY TIMES-GAZETTE

120 N Main, Suite #4 El Dorado, KS 67042
PHONE 316-402-1415 • FAX: 316-321-7722

Periodicals postage paid at El Dorado, KS 67042
Published Tuesday and Saturday
by Butler County Times-Gazette at 120 N Main, Suite #4, El Dorado, KS 67042.

POSTMASTER:
Send address changes to The Butler County Times-Gazette, 120 N Main, Suite #4, El Dorado, KS 67042

- Jeff Gulley, Editor
jgulley@cherryroad.com
- Nikole Babb, Reporter
nbabb@cherryroad.com
- Charles Chaney, Sports Editor
cchaney@butlercountytimesgazette.com

- Meredith Thompson, Advertising
mthompson@cherryroad.com
913-682-0305 x2134
- Rhonda Zinn, Legal Publications
legals@butlercountytimesgazette.com
- Lori Sibley, Circulation
lsibley@butlercountytimesgazette.com

Print delivery available within the newspaper distribution area only. By submitting your address and/or email, you understand that you may receive promotional offers from Cherry Road and its related companies. You may opt out of receiving any such offers at any time by emailing lsibley@butlercountytimesgazette.com or calling 316-321-1120. You may cancel your subscription at any time for a refund of the unused portion of your subscription by emailing lsibley@butlercountytimesgazette.com or calling 316- 321-1120.