



# Small Business Buzz

A unique newsletter featuring small business for Des Moines patrons.



**One Year In The Can!** We have evolved at Small Business Buzz...changing our layout and honing our focus to meet the needs and interests of our readers.

Small Businesses are not just a vital source for our economy—local entrepreneurs help to shape the character and vision of our community. Small Business is about individual ingenuity and drive. In the issues ahead we plan to highlight more of these courageous people.

We've learned that small business changes the landscapes of our neighborhoods, and people remember those changes years later. Everyone has a story and can recall significant moments that involve the shops and owners of small business in their neighborhood. It is those stories that connect us. We'll feature special memories of customers as well.

In this issue, we are exploring a pastime very close to our

hearts...**going to the movies.** Things have changed dramatically in the movie industry over the years. Today people have many choices in movie viewing, from purchasing or renting DVDs, to on-demand access, and to satellite dishes.

However a movie seen in the theater still has a special magic that can't be found at home. It's the cushy seats, the shared audience experience, the smell of popcorn from the concession stand, and the sound and look of the movie itself. Go to the movies and you take a journey.

Des Moines is very fortunate to have access to films off the beaten path. It is the commitment of local private movie theater owners that makes that possible. We visited with the key players who have been at the heart of privately owned movie theaters for decades. They had and still have a vision for Des Moines entertainment because of their love for the art as well as the business of movies.

## CITIZEN FRIDLEY



Projector at Capri Theater 1960. Fridley photo collection

Robert Fridley built an empire.

Fridley Theaters employs more than 500 people, and owns 135 screens dotted across the state of Iowa and into Nebraska. Fridley Theatres has been key to providing movie entertainment for Iowans over the past 60 years.

Robert Fridley has a gracious and joyous presence. He is also a natural storyteller, with vivid recall of events and people over his long career in the business. Though much of the day-to-day details of operations are handled by his associates (including members of his family), Fridley is still the

heart of his business—and a wealth of knowledge about the history of film and the industry. He became a fan of the movie business early on.

"I had loved it since I was 4 years old and saw my first movie.

My Uncle, who had owned the theater in Lake City, also had a theater in Ida Grove during the 1920's. I used to visit him during the summer and I just loved being around the theater. It was so busy during the day, whether he was busy meeting with film salesmen, planning advertising campaigns, getting advertising ready, or just working on the theater. A lot of people think ... 'well what do you do during the day?' You have a lot more to do during the day. You kind of let down when you open the theater in the evening."

Fridley graduated high school in 1935 during the depths of the depression. He explains, "You just couldn't get a job. I started what they called a kerosene or Jack Rabbit circuit." Fridley rented portable projection and sound equipment and went from town to town showing movies in vacant theaters and opera houses.

Fridley smiles broadly as he recalls how his days of the Jack Rabbit ended. "The year 1939 was supposed to have been a great year for the movie business...a year of a lot of

*(Continued on page 3)*



## Coppola Makes An Offer Des Moines Can't Refuse

The enthusiasm in his voice is a giveaway. Ask Mike Coppola, a Des Moines Developer, to describe his vision for creating Fleur Cinema & Café and he's very clear.

"This theater is a demonstration that something like this can be unique. Fleur is like the specialty art houses in other cities ...only better."

The details stand out. The modular and vibrant décor of the lounge area welcomes you to take a seat while you let your date get the treats. This is not just a movie house that shows a wide range of movies for every taste—you can come hungry and grab a meal to satisfy your edible tastes as well. The concession choices include sandwiches, Paninis, baked goods, gourmet coffee, beer, wine and yes...even popcorn and candy. The prices don't

blow the budget, either, with reasonable prices for concessions as well as tickets.

But the food and the ambiance are just part of the bonus to what makes Fleur a real gem for Des Moines. It's the movies. Not just movies that are in big release, but there is always a great selection of independent and other "small" films that wouldn't even be seen in Iowa if it weren't for this outstanding venue. Coppola readily admits that he just loves movies. "They allow us an opportunity to visit other worlds and be inspired by people and stories." His staff also knows and appreciates film. Special events are hosted at the Fleur, such as the upcoming

### Coppola Favorites

Cool Hand Luke  
"So Many Great Lines I love."

Godfather 1 & 2  
"Great Cinematography."

The Way We Were  
"Great Chemistry"

Clint Eastwood  
"The spaghetti Western was an important influence"

*(Continued on page 4)*

What's next?

**No Beans about it. Des Moines loves getting the jitters every morning. We look at some of the local flavor in coffee and tea houses in our next issue.**



## N Mind Marketing

Custom newsletters

Copywriting services

*We help keep your business on your customer's mind.*



## Mahon: Rebel With A Cause

His wit is sharp and so is his business savvy. You have to be sharp to be successful in this business—and Bev Mahon keeps busy running all the aspects of the Varsity theater. He knows his business and he respects the tastes of his patrons, so he

makes it his business to keep in front of what is coming out, well ahead of the season.

### How long have you been in the theater business?

"I was figuring that out the other day and I think I'm in my 74th year."

### How do you pick your films?

"I'm always reading and keeping up with pictures. There are so many routes through which I may get a film. It is not an easy process to follow. I tried explaining it to an attorney once and he asked me to try again. It is something that keeps changing, and there are new people all the time."

### Have your years in the business made it easier to obtain a film?

Twenty years ago there was a camaraderie but that doesn't happen

any more. Promises can be made and then broken. It used to be a two-way street. You'd be asked to help out with this film and then promised that the next one would be a better hit."

### Is picking the right films the primary thing you do?

That's what it's all about. Selling tickets and operating the theater is a small part.

### Your concessions are always reasonably priced, a real deal compared to so many theatres all around.

"I went to see a movie not too long ago and noted that the cheapest drinks were \$3.40. If you start to add up the price of tickets and the rest...a family can spend \$60. A person can feel really cheated if he didn't come out liking the movie. What I try to do is not insult anyone's intelligence. I don't think people should have to take out a second mortgage to see a movie. I hope it is appreciated."

### Do you pat yourself on the back when a film is a hit?

"I just turn out the lights and hope for the best. As they say, don't read the press clippings or you're likely to believe them."

### Do you have a favorite movie?

I remember when we had the Holiday on SW 9th and when Dr. Zhivago was released. That was a real event...a memorable movie.

(Continued from page 1)

great releases. Of course, there were a lot of great releases during the 30s and 40s, but in 1939 I went broke. I was 22.” Fridley went back to Des Moines where he had been raised and worked briefly for National Screen Service.

Then, in August of 1942, Fridley was drafted into the Army. Fridley spent the next 3 ½ years providing entertainment for the enlisted men as the supervising theater manager at Camp Myles Standish in Massachusetts. The American Movie business

Fridley Favorites

**“If I had only one movie to watch it would probably be *An American in Paris* because of all those great musical numbers. If it were to be a drama, it would probably be *All About Eve*. I have a favorite comedy that I love, *The Importance of Being Ernest...the version with Edith Evans.*”**

was a big part of the war effort, both domestically and overseas during World War II, with many professionals in the industry spending their time in the military helping to provide what movies do best—entertain and educate.

“Even when I was in the army, I couldn’t get away from the business,” Fridley muses.

The early 1950s brought the TV revolution to the country, and by 1952, TV had a great impact on the Midwest

movie theater business. As attendance began to slow with the increased popularity of television, Fridley decided to move to California to study film production at the University of Southern California. “I decided if it had to be TV— then I would get a job behind the scenes in TV.” Even though he loved the course work at USC, he soon realized his living was destined to be made in the movie theater. Then, November of 1953 while in California, Bob Fridley married his sweetheart from Lake City, Iowa, and he and his wife headed back home.

An initial move back in his home state was to form a shared business interest in the Varsity theater in Des Moines with Bev Mahon. (Many years later that partnership dissolved). Then, in 1960, Fridley opened the first 70 mm theater in Iowa—the newly designed and re-furbished Capri Theater. In November of that year, the Capri theatre (near 42<sup>nd</sup> and University, which remained in business into the late 1980s) hosted the Iowa premier of Ben Hur.

Today the movie theater industry has changed and the focus on sustaining income has moved from the revenue generated by films to relying more heavily on concessions. Fridley acknowledges that it used to be that 35 percent of gross sales went

(Continued on page 4)



Picture Top: Uptown Center before Fridley changes into newly remodeled Capri theater in 1960 (below). Photo courtesy of Fridley collection

## Word of Mouth



For a [Free Subscription](#) to Small Business Buzz send an email to [INmindmarketing@mchsi.com](mailto:INmindmarketing@mchsi.com).



The Des Moines Theater 1931 - Courtesy of the Fridley photo collection

The **Des Moines Theater** was considered a movie palace. Patrons enjoyed baskets of fresh cut flowers, air conditioning, live orchestral music, and lush seating. The exterior sign was the largest in the state measuring 60 by 20 feet and lighted with 2,000 10-watt globes.

The A.H. Blank theater resided in the Iowa Building (completed in 1919) at Fifth and Grand. The last show was January 27, 1966. The Iowa building was torn down in 1969.

*(Fridley Continued from page 3)*

to film rental but now it is up to 60 percent.

"It doesn't leave you enough money to pay for the payroll, the insurance, the advertising, and the energy." Still the Fridley mission remains to provide great movies in clean well-managed theaters with concessions that are reasonably priced.

Robert Fridley remains hands-on in his business, backed by capable people. There are the daily activities of negotiating with film companies, overseeing the management of multiple screens, and their expansion. Fridley has also been in the video business for years, with the successful Video Warehouse, long a staple of video rentals and sales at the corner of Merle Hay and Franklin. For Fridley Theatres and Video, it has been a long and successful love affair with the movies, and it continues on.

*(Coppola Continued from page 2)*

Scrooge-athon for the holidays.

Coppola is a veteran of property management, but his voice is filled with passion for the movie theater. It was a project intended to contribute to the community. Fleur has also done double-duty as a resource for many charitable events.

Why did Mike Coppola think Des Moines was ready for Fleur Cinema and Café? He tells Small Business Buzz that "It really was a crazy gift to us all."



## Caligiuri's Cinema Royal

Who says there are no good dramas in the movies anymore? Star Wars III opened at the Merle Hay Cinema to a packed crowd. A woman showed up that afternoon looking for her son who was supposed to be in school. She looked up and down the rows of filled seats in the auditorium until she found that one young man. Chuck Caligiuri laughs, "she went in among all those kids and found her son and pulled him right out of there."

That is just one small story, and Caligiuri has many movie stories that span a profession which he began in 1947. Before his retirement, Caligiuri had been the Paramount branch manager in charge of motion picture distribution for the states of Iowa and Nebraska.

In 1992, "just to keep busy," Caligiuri leased the space which had recently closed as the Merle Hay Plaza Theater. He completely rejuvenated the interior with all new seats, new wide screen projection equipment. Caligiuri was the first in Iowa to bring Dolby Digital THX surround Sound to a theater.

Even though the theater is nestled in the heart of the M. H. Mall all at a time when malls seem to be in abundance in the area, this theater holds a special place as one of the very few remaining single-screen, wide-screen movie houses in the state. It is the wide-screen and the full sound that shows cinematography at its best, and that movie experience is slipping away as theaters move to multi-screens to help defray costs.

You may wonder what possess a man in his retired years to invest in a movie theater.

"It is a business that gets in your blood," Caligiuri concedes. He is especially happy with the midnight showings of Star Wars III that were such a success, and announces he will be keeping quite busy showing the newest Harry Potter movie into the holidays.

### Caligiuri Movie Favorites

The original Odd Couple

Raiders of the Lost Ark



**What makes yours so great?**

Tell us where you get your morning "cup-o-joe." Be it tea or coffee we will post the answers in the next issue and share what we learn with your favorite morning hangout.

**As always thanks to our loyal readers... you keep us keeping on. May you grow and prosper in numbers!**