

Movie Theaters of the San Gorgonio Pass

The Banning Public Library's last question asked about movie theaters in the San Gorgonio Pass. We had numerous responses to the question and found information on three theaters; the Banning Theatre (later known as the Banning Fox Theatre), the Beaumont Theatre and the Cherry Pass Drive-In. The only one of the three still in operation is the Banning Fox Theatre and it has been difficult to find information and photographs of the Beaumont Theatre and the Cherry Pass Drive-In. Theaters often use the historical English spelling of "theatre" (re) in their names but are usually referred to in the United States with the "theater" (er) spelling.

Most of the local history research available pertains to the Banning Fox Theatre because of its longevity, 83 years since its opening in 1928. A May 17, 1928 article from the Banning Record announced the grand opening of the theater with excitement and anticipation. The theater opened on Wednesday, May 23, 1928, with the world premiere of Buster Keaton's "Steamboat Bill, Jr." The theater was managed by an E. E. Beattie and was built with an investment of \$100,000. The theater was described as having 750 seats, of which 126 were "luxurious divans." Music was furnished by a Robert Morton on the "two-manual organ."

The Banning Theatre was also used for vaudeville acts and live radio broadcasts, most famously those hosted by Bob Hope. The theater was called the Banning Theatre until sometime in 1948 when it was purchased by Fox West Coast Theaters and renamed the Banning Fox Theatre. It was remodeled in the 1950s, when the stage was removed. A Riverside Press Enterprise article from June 6, 1989, mentions Banning resident, Genevieve Gomien, as being one of the organists who backed up shows and vaudeville comedians at the Fox Theatre before the stage was removed. Miss Gomien also taught piano locally and was the organist for the Precious Blood Catholic Church.

Long-time Banning resident Marian Bryant Schell remembers paying 25 cents for admission to the Banning Fox Theatre. She says a large medallion from the original theater is still on the dividing wall between the now divided theater. She also raised a good question as to the whereabouts of the tall "Felt's Jewelry" clock that used to stand in front of the theater. Does anyone know what happened to the clock?

The other walk-in theater in the Pass was the Beaumont Theatre located at 450 Sixth Street in Beaumont. The building is currently called the Beaumont Antique Mall. The theater was built and owned by C. L. "Jimmy" and Ida Mae James, who came to Beaumont about 1937. There was no information available as to when the theater actually opened but there was an ad for it in the 1944 Banning High School yearbook. It apparently closed down in the late 1950s.

A description of the theater from the Banning High School 1944 yearbook reads: "The Beaumont Theatre is the newest theater in the San Geronio Pass. Just built in the last few years, it has some of the newest of equipment. Jimmy James, the theater's manager, is one of the nicest people we of the annual staff met on our tour. He took us through the theater and pointed out such things as the softest of upholstered seats, air conditioning for the comfort of the public and the sound proof feature which shuts out loud noises of trucks and cars. The reason for the sound proofing, explained Mr. James, is that the theater is so very conveniently located on highways 99, 60 and 70." Long-time Beaumont resident Shirley Hurlbirt and her two sisters, Barbara and Nadene were all usherettes at the Beaumont Theatre and have fond memories of working there.

I spoke with one of the three owners of the building, Teri, who had been told that after the theater closed it became a roller rink for a short while. The floor had to be leveled to correct the incline of the theater seats and make it useable for skaters. The side portions of the theater were used for small businesses, one being Woodley's Jewelers, and it was known at that time as the "Theatre Arcade." After being a roller rink it was used by Deutsch Company and later became a motorcycle shop. In approximately 1989 it became the Beaumont Antique Mall. Much of the old theater building is original, including the projection booth which is still visible above the front counter of the antique mall.

Partway between the Banning Theatre and the Beaumont Theatre, also on Ramsey/Sixth Street was the Cherry Pass Drive-In. It was located at 1571 E. Sixth Street, approximately where the vacant land is just west of the present-day Applebee's. The drive-in stretched between present-day Food 4 Less and the Beaumont swap meet. Telephone book research shows a listing for the Cherry Pass Drive-In in 1952 (the oldest phone book owned by the library) and was closed down in the late 1960s. It also listed the owner as being Jimmy James, the same man who built the Beaumont Theatre. The screen at the Cherry Pass Drive-In faced south toward the I-10 and cars entered off of Sixth Street. There was a playground set up in front of the screen to occupy the children of families waiting until it was dark enough to project the film onto the screen.

Drive-In theaters were an American icon, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, and often served as backdrops for the lives of the public. Movie goers started out as children going to the drive-ins with their parents before they became teenagers. The teen years brought cars with the back ends dragging the ground as boys chipped in for one ticket for the driver and piled into the trunk. A few years later the drive-in provided a testing ground for teenage romance. One local resident described the Cherry Pass Drive-In as a "Passion Pit." Soon after, the same teens grew into young adulthood and eventually brought their own children to the drive-in, playing in the

same playground sets before the showing of the movie.

Along with the history of showing motion pictures the Pass area has also been used for filming parts of several feature films. The earliest one found to be filmed in Banning was "Buckshot Johnny." The 1914 silent film used the downtown section of Banning for its set. The director was Hobart Bosworth. The Tom Hughes book, "History of Banning and the San Gorgonio Pass," describes the plot of the film as; "The bank was robbed, the town shot-up, and two or three 'bad men' were lynched in Water canyon." According to internet sources a print of the film is in the Library of Congress film archive, under the name "Buckshot John."

Other films made in the San Gorgonio Pass are; "Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here," a 1969 film starring Robert Redford, Robert Blake and Katharine Ross, the 1985 Pee Wee Herman film "Pee Wee's Big Adventure," and the 1994 film "How to Make an American Quilt," starring Winona Ryder.

The Beaumont Theatre and the Cherry Pass Drive-In are long gone but the Banning Fox Theatre stands like a surviving gladiator in a world of changing mediums. Even with all the exciting technological changes in the home entertainment industry the Fox is often packed for both matinees and evening shows. We still love the giant screens, the bombastic sounds, the smell and taste of hot buttered popcorn, and the joy of sharing a special evening of cinema with friends and family.

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Photograph Captions for Article:

Photo Caption #1: "The Banning Theatre in 1944, showing the movie, 'Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo'."

Photo Caption #2: "The marquis of the Beaumont Theatre in 1944."

Photo Caption #3: "Banning Record, July 13, 1951, advertisement for the Cherry Pass Drive-In."