

— HISTORY —

Picture shows thrived in movie-hungry town

Before Willimantic's first purposely built cinema, the Gem Theatre, was built in 1912, moving pictures were shown in a variety of locations across the city. They were known as "Nickel Theatres," and by 1908, the city was experiencing a "moving picture war" between the Bijou, Elite and Scenic Temple movie houses.

The movies were still very much in their infancy, and Willimantic's discerning public was attracted to those places offering supporting programs with the picture shows.

Willimantic had taken to the movies like a duck takes to water. In 1904, Harry Gale opened the city's first movie theater in a store in the Kimbel Block at 850-58 Main St., and charged five cents for a 30-minute show consisting of a movie, or "silent drama" and an illustrated song — a hurdy-gurdy player accompanied a singer, for whom the backdrop was a moving picture.

The makeshift theater could only accommodate 100 people, so Gale sought larger premises and sold it to John Hurley. In 1907, Hurley went into partnership with James Pickett and the pair pur-

chased Excelsior Hall, which was the abandoned Spiritualist Temple on Bank Street, and converted it into a cinema, which they named the Scenic Temple Theatre.

Meanwhile James Clune, who operated a penny arcade in the west store of the Hayden Block on Main Street, started showing movies. Business was so brisk he opened a second movie house, the Elite Theatre, located in the Hayden Block's east store. Today the Hayden Block houses the extension to the Savings Institute bank.

To keep up with the competition, John H. Gray offered movie shows on a Sunday night in the Kimbel Block. However, in an attempt to safeguard the morals of the local populace, the Congregationalist Church sought an injunction to close it, and Gray consequently abandoned shows on the Sabbath.



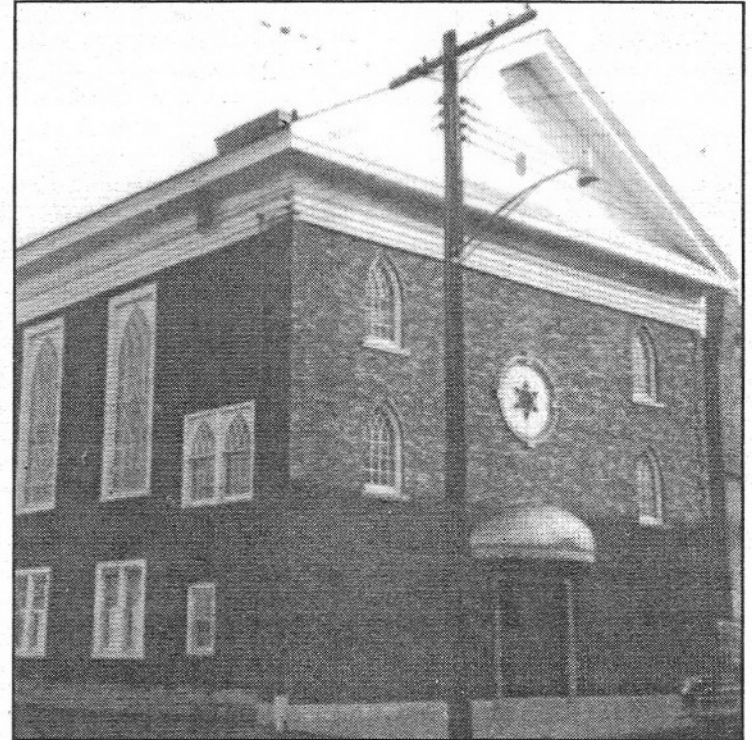
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However, business picked up in 1907 when he featured a movie about the murder of the famed architect Sanford White. Gray sought larger premises, and in 1908 he converted a small wooden building next to the Jordan Block, and opened the Bijou Theatre.

The three local movie moguls competed with each other by hiring a complete vaudeville show of five or six acts to entertain audiences before the movie was shown. A local newspaper boasted that you could get better entertainment in Willimantic for five cents than you could in the bigger cities for a dime.

However, it was forecast that the movie men could not keep undercutting each other, as it cost \$50 a night to hire a vaudeville troupe and a movie. Something had to give, and in 1909, the low prices and diminishing audiences led to the closure of the Elite Theatre.

With competition reduced, the proprietors of the Scenic Temple Theatre purchased vacant land on Main Street, invested \$30,000, and built a 1,000-seater electric picture palace. The Gem Theatre



The Scenic Temple Theatre on Bank Street in Willimantic as it looked in 1952 when it housed Temple Bnai Israel. Before it was demolished in 1972, the building was the home of the Willimantic Calvary Baptist Church.

opened to great acclaim in 1912, under the management of John R. Pickett. No one could have guessed that in just over 50 years time it would be converted into a YMCA swimming pool.

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