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Film and the Making of a Modern Nebraska (1895-1920): A
Historical Geography

By

William Helmer

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts

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Under the Supervision of Professor David J. Wishart

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Film and the Making of a Modern Nebraska (1895-1920):

A Historical Geography

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University of Nebraska, 2022

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This thesis is a historical geography of the first 25 years of film exhibition in Nebraska, primarily focusing on Southeastern Nebraska. My research chronicles how the first films were viewed, and the contemporary cultural reaction to film. I introduce my topic by explaining how it fits into geographies of media and the historical geography of Nebraska. In my second chapter I describe how film technology first came to Nebraska in 1895. Here I map the locations of the first film screenings, and provide commentary on the popular reaction to the technology. In my third chapter I examine the first Nebraska movie theaters, which were founded during the Nickelodeon Era of movie theaters (1906-1915). In chapter three I write about the business and culture of moviegoing, before studying and mapping new theaters constructed after 1910. I explore the social impact of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) in chapter four, along with mapping the locations where it played in Nebraska. I end my thesis with a brief discussion of the current state of movie theaters in Nebraska.

To Mom and Dad, Harry, and Hannah

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This thesis is the result of help and assistance from many. I started graduate school in 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic, and all research and writing took place during these strange and unprecedented times. Because of this, the support I received was even more meaningful. Even though isolation was a notable part of life over the past few years, I never felt like I was alone in my academic life. If I ever had questions or concerns, or just needed to vent, I had people to turn to.

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

Movie theaters are one of the most popular types of entertainment in Nebraska, and this has been the case for over a century. With 92 theaters currently showing films, and hundreds that existed throughout Nebraska's history, Nebraskans have a strong tradition of going to the movies.¹ Theaters are prominent venues for social and cultural activity in towns and cities across the state. These theaters are clearly visible on the landscape, and are a large part of human geography in Nebraska. Movies change Nebraska's cultural environment through their influence on society and people's worldviews. Study of the geography of theaters and moviegoing is essential to understanding the nature of place in Nebraska.

Motion pictures first came to the Cornhusker State in the Gilded Age. The cultural landscape was changed by the new technology. Nebraskans were now connected to everywhere else in a way they had never been. They could see films of anything from anywhere in the world. Soon businesses were built to house motion picture screenings, permanently marking the impact of film on the physical landscape. This thesis is concerned with the first period of film exhibition and the subsequent establishment of movie theaters at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

Overview

My research starts in chapter two of this thesis by chronicling the earliest “moving pictures,” shown in Nebraska. Nebraskans first read about the technology in newspapers, before businessmen eventually brought it to their state in 1895. The technology first came to large cities then to smaller towns. I found that film was viewed as a major modernizing force in a state that often felt disconnected from the latest developments in technology. Film also allowed Nebraskans to see depictions of places from all over the world, and this forever changed their geographic knowledge. I compiled two maps for this chapter, both showing the first locations where new film technologies were exhibited.

For the second chapter, I primarily relied on historic Nebraska newspapers to determine cultural reactions to moving pictures and to find the locations of the first motion picture showings. The *Omaha Daily Bee* and *The Nebraska State Journal* were the most useful, as they did extensive reporting on amusements in southeastern Nebraska. These newspapers also included advertisements for motion picture showings. Other newspapers were used to supplement my findings. I combined this newspaper analysis with research from books published by film historians. These books provided background information about the origins of motion picture technology and the nationwide spread of film exhibition.

In chapter three, I write about the origins of movie theaters in Nebraska. Theaters for the sole purpose of showing films were founded in Nebraska around 1907. This first period of movie theaters is often referred to as the Nickelodeon Era. Attending

movies was instantly one of the most popular forms of recreation in the state. The first theaters were often of poor quality, and there were concerns about the decency of the films they played. Better movie theaters were constructed in the 1910s. For this chapter, I mapped the location of new and improved movie houses constructed in Omaha around 1915.

Nebraska newspapers continued to be useful for chapter three. The *Omaha Daily Bee* did the most in-depth coverage of movie theaters out of all Nebraska publications. *The Moving Picture World*, a national trade magazine focusing on film, also covered many cinema related events in Nebraska after its founding in 1907. Comparing reports in Nebraska newspapers and *The Moving Picture World* allowed me to create accurate timelines for the construction of theaters in Nebraska.

In chapter four, I write about the impact of a single film on the cultural landscape. *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith, came to Nebraska in November of 1915. The film's narrative was set during the Civil War and Reconstruction Era, and was deeply sympathetic to the Confederacy and the Ku Klux Klan. This portrayal altered the worldview of many white Nebraskans by convincing them of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. Race relations in Nebraska were harmed by the increase in racial prejudice that the film inspired among white Nebraskans. The Ku Klux Klan was reborn in the US in response to *The Birth of a Nation*, and the only major actions of the Klan in Nebraska took place during this period. I mapped locations that screened *The Birth of a Nation* for this chapter.

The Birth of a Nation was met with fervent opposition from Nebraska's Black community. Black Nebraskans and their allies engaged in a bitter legal battle to stop the film from screening in Nebraska, with mixed results. This activism led to the chartering of permanent National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapters in Nebraska, and created a landscape for future activism against racial injustice. The Lincoln Motion Picture Company, the first Black-owned movie studio in the US, was cofounded by an Omaha postman shortly after the run of *The Birth of a Nation*. The film had major ramifications for Nebraska's culture; effecting both white worldviews and Black responses to oppression.

I used a variety of sources to understand the impact of *The Birth of a Nation*. Books about the development of *The Birth of a Nation* were useful to write about the background of the film. To understand the cultural impact of the film, I studied the reports about it in the Nebraska press. I used advertisements in Nebraska newspapers to determine the dates and locations of showings. Omaha's Black newspaper *The Monitor* covered most events in the fight against the film. The records of the Nebraska NAACP housed in the archives at History Nebraska were also useful to understand the actions against the film. *The Moving Picture World* ran some articles on the reaction to *The Birth of a Nation* in Nebraska as well. I used articles about the second wave of the Ku Klux Klan to write about the activities of the group in Nebraska. Books on early Black filmmaking provided details about the Lincoln Motion Picture Company.

I end my thesis with a postscript containing a short discussion about the current state of movie theaters in Nebraska. My research focuses on the period from 1895-

1920, but the introduction of moving pictures during that time created cultural trends that have endured to the present. It is the beginning period of Nebraska's culture of moviegoing that I explored throughout this study.

Literature Review

My research combines elements and approaches from historical geography and geographies of media—a subdiscipline of human geography. I use a variety of historical sources to uncover the circumstances in which motion pictures came to Nebraska, and to ascertain the locations of film screenings and movie theaters. Through these sources, I determined the cultural setting of film viewership while it was in its infancy. I use concepts from geographies of media to write about the impact that film had on the social landscape and on people's perceptions of the world.

Little has been published on the historical geography of film in Nebraska. Most of what does exist focuses on past film production in Nebraska, or filmmakers from Nebraska. The essay "Film" in David Wishart's *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains* contains a helpful overview of films shot and set in Nebraska, along with a list of actors and creatives from the state.² Paul Eisloeffel and Andrea Paul's article "Hollywood on the Plains: Nebraska's Contribution to Early American Cinema" in *Journal of the West* provides a more in-depth look at the first films produced in Nebraska, mostly focusing on *In the Days of '75 and '76*, which was the first feature film made in Nebraska.³ Studies of films made in Nebraska are certainly worthwhile; however, there is a complete lack of scholarship regarding how motion pictures and movie theaters came to

Nebraska. There are maps of historic movie theaters in Nebraska (cinematreasures.org has the most extensive of these), but the untold story of the first theaters has long existed in obscurity. This thesis will fill the previous gap in research.

Along with being a work of historical geography attempting to recapture a slice of life in the past, my research applies concepts from geographies of media. Film geography is the most prominent topic in media geography, and this field has influenced me the most as I study film in Nebraska. The work of scholars Chris Lukinbeal and Stuart Aitken had the most profound impact in guiding my approaches to media geography. Their methods of analysis inform how I relate media to its impact on the landscape.

The 2015 book *Mediated Geographies and Geographies of Media*, edited by Susan Mains, Julie Cupples, and Chris Lukinbeal, is the most significant current work in the media geography subdiscipline. The introduction of the book includes a history of media geography, which led me to several other important studies of media geography. *Mediated Geographies and Geographies of Media* also contains the paper "Film Geography: A Review and Prospectus" in which Laura Sharp and Chris Lukinbeal explain various approaches to geographic analysis of film.⁴ Both of these papers were deeply useful to my research.

In order to understand how my research fits into media geography, I will first provide a brief history of the subdiscipline. Chris Lukinbeal traces the origins of media geography to J.K. Wright's 1947 speech "Terrae Incognitae: The Place of the Imagination in Geography" to the Association of American Geographers (AAG).⁵ In this speech, Wright introduced the concept of geosophy. Geosophy is the study of all people's

geographic points of view. Because media shapes the way people view the world, geographers must consider media. Everything the common person reads in print, or watches on screens, is formative in how they understand geography. Wright stated in his address that film should be considered part of geographic knowledge, because it is an essential medium for communicating ideas about places, environments, and landscapes.⁶ Lukinbeal then explains that geographers focused on individual depictions of landscapes in media for decades, before the first books on media geography were published in the 1980s, and the first film geography books in the 1990s.⁷ Media geography was born out of a desire to understand how media creates geographic knowledge, and my research explores how film shaped Nebraskans' knowledge of their cultural landscape.

The first book solely about film geography, *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film* (1994), edited by Stuart Aitken and Leo Zonn, introduced the idea that film is deeply tied to place. They write, "The way spaces are used and places are portrayed in film reflects prevailing cultural norms, ethical mores, societal structures, and ideologies. Concomitantly, the impact of a film on an audience can mold social, cultural, and environmental experiences."⁸ It is this second type of film geography that I involve in my research. Film molded the cultural environment in Nebraska, whether by changing how people were entertained, or by changing how they viewed racial minorities in their places.

My thesis thus shares themes with past media geography studies, and I use theoretical approaches developed by other media geographers. "Film Geography: A

Review and Prospectus” in *Mediated Geographies and Geographies of Media* describes the author-text-reader (ATR) model for film geography. This model contains three approaches for analyzing film. The first is the author-centered approach, in which researchers focus on how films are created and produced. Studies of film industries are common for the author-centered approach. The second is the text-centered approach. This approach studies films as individual units of geographic evidence. A text-centered study will analyze certain locations using films made about said locations. The final approach is the reader-centered approach. This approach concentrates on how films are consumed, and the influence they have on audiences. I primarily use the reader-centered approach in my thesis.

It is through the reader-centered approach that I determined how Nebraskans first came to view films, initially at exhibitions then later in movie theaters. I found reports of the first film exhibitions, and examined the cultural environment these exhibitions were situated in. I studied a variety of sources to arrive at conclusions about the effects of early film viewership. Sharp and Lukinbeal write that there is a lack of scholarship in this regard, saying, “[a] needed area of research in the reader-centered approach is engagement with historical geographies of exhibition, especially as this relates to spectatorship.”⁹ Sharp and Lukinbeal also write that ethnographies of film reception are a common topic for film geographers, and this is the kind of ethnographic research that I conduct in chapter four. By using the ATR model, I position my research alongside other geographies of film, and I extend film geography to an environment where it has not been previously applied.

The book *Engaging Film: Geographies of Mobility and Identity* (2002), edited by Tim Cresswell and Deborah Dixon, explores the philosophical underpinnings of film geography. In “Introduction: Engaging Film” Cresswell and Dixon contend there are three ways to apply film to geography: mobility, pedagogy, and identity. Films are images in motion; thus through mobility geographers study how film represents reality. *Engaging Film* contains several papers exploring how film recreates the “real” on the “reel.” Films are also used in pedagogy, and papers in *Engaging Film* provide multiple examples of films being used in the classroom to teach geographic concepts. Most important for this thesis is the study of film’s effect on identity.

Cresswell and Dixon write that identity is produced from external factors that shape how people view themselves and the social categories they place themselves within.¹⁰ Films have the power to shape identity. Film can change how people understand the world around them and their place in it. Film altered identity in Nebraska by shifting the worldview of Nebraskans. Film changed how they viewed their state, as film made Nebraska feel much more connected to everywhere else. Film brought Nebraskans images of various events they had never seen, and this gave Nebraskans a more worldly identity. Film also could change social identity. *The Birth of A Nation* strengthened white identity by adding legitimacy to the ideology of white supremacy, while the campaign against the film changed Black identity in Nebraska by making anti-racist activism a regular part of life.

This thesis uses approaches previously developed by film geographers, but it is an original work of scholarship. Regional historical geographies of film exhibition are

rare, and future studies of other states or locations could help to fill this void. More in-depth study of the development of theaters in Nebraska, or in specific Nebraska towns, could also help to expand the subdiscipline of media geography. As of now, this thesis is the first foray into understanding the cultural landscape that film formed and shaped in Nebraska's past.

-
- ¹ *Movie theaters in Nebraska*. Cinema Treasures. Retrieved June 27, 2022, from <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/united-states/nebraska>
- ² David Wishart. "Film," in *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, David Wishart (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2011). <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.fil.001>
- ³ Paul J. Eisloeffel and Andrea I. Paul. "Hollywood on the Plains: Nebraska's Contribution to Early American Cinema." *Journal of the West* 33 (1994): 13-19.
- ⁴ Laura Sharp and Chris Lukinbeal. "Film Geography: A Review and Prospectus." In *Mediated Geographies and Geographies of Media*. ed. Susan Mains, Julie Cupples, and Chris Lukinbeal. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), 21.
- ⁵ Julie Cupples, Chris Lukinbeal, and Susan Mains. "Introducing Mediated Geographies and Geographies of Media." In *Mediated Geographies and Geographies of Media*. ed. Susan Mains, Julie Cupples, and Chris Lukinbeal. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), 9.
- ⁶ J.K. Wright. "Terra Incognita: The Place of the Imagination in Geography," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 15, (1947): 10.
- ⁷ Cupples, Lukinbeal, and Mains. *Mediated Geographies and Geographies of Media*, 10-11.
- ⁸ Stuart Aitken and Leo Zonn. "Re-Presenting the Place Pastiche." In *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film*. ed. Aitken and Zonn. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 1994), 5.
- ⁹ Laura Sharp and Chris Lukinbeal. "Film Geography: A Review and Prospectus." In *Mediated Geographies and Geographies of Media*. ed. Susan Mains, Julie Cupples, and Chris Lukinbeal. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), 31.
- ¹⁰ Tim Cresswell and Deborah Dixon. "Introduction: Engaging Film," In *Engaging Film: Geographies of Mobility and Identity* ed. Tim Cresswell and Deborah Dixon. (Oxford, England: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2002), 6.

CHAPTER TWO

FILM IN NEBRASKA, 1895-1905

Inventors first developed motion picture technology in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Historians note that several precursors to film have existed since antiquity, such as magic lanterns that could project series of images one after another to give a simple illusion of motion.¹ However, innovators created the first devices that displayed moving pictures with strips of film in the 1880s. At this time, several inventors, such as Louis Le Prince and the Lumiere Brothers, created cameras that could capture series of photographs on film, and created other devices to shine light through the film to create images.² The first of these devices to be publicly exhibited in the United States was the Kinetoscope. Developed by an employee of Thomas Edison in the early 1890s, the Kinetoscope displayed moving images that a viewer observed by looking through a peephole.³

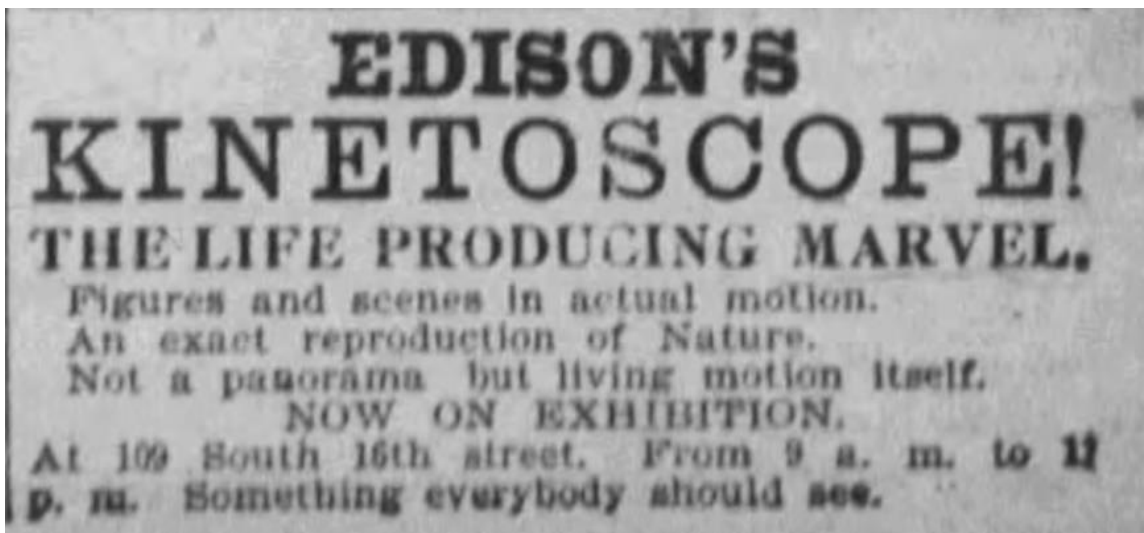


(Figure 2.1) Kinetoscope Parlor (cinematreasures.org, 1895)

The Kinetoscope had its first public demonstrations in 1893, and by 1894 Edison exhibited it for profit in cities across the US.⁴ This was also the year Nebraskans began to read about the new technology in newspapers. The Nebraska papers picked up national stories about the exploits of the “Wizard of Menlo Park” and his new kinetoscope, “by which forty-six pictures are taken in one second.”⁵ These stories praised the innovativeness of the device by adding remarks like, “This will be a boon to the young man with the new spring suit.”⁶ Other newspaper reports went into great detail explaining how the machine worked, and described its illusion of motion to help readers conceptualize something they had never seen.⁷ Information about this new advancement in technology reached Nebraskans well before the technology itself.

Edison likely already had the admiration of Nebraskans. Many new technologies emerged during the Gilded Age, and Americans heaped praise on technological innovators. Edison in particular gained considerable fame as an American pioneer of innovation. Historian Thomas Hughes wrote about Edison, “As newspapers drew public attention to the invention compound [where Edison worked] and to minor and major inventions that did emerge, many of which touched everyday life directly, in the public mind Menlo Park acquired a quality of enchantment.”⁸ The ability of the Kinetoscope to play moving pictures in a way no other technology had done, combined with Edison’s existing reputation, made the device an instant source of intrigue. Moving pictures started as a technological development on the East Coast, then spread throughout the country, first appearing in major cities, then traveling to smaller cities and rural areas, following the nationwide excitement about new inventions.

The first motion picture showings in Nebraska likely took place in early 1895, as this is when the newspaper advertisements first appeared for kinetoscope viewings.⁹ The device was first on exhibition in Parlors, a store in downtown Omaha, in February 1895. The original advertisements described the experience as, “The Life Producing Marvel. Figures and Scenes in Actual Motion. An exact reproduction of Nature. Not a panorama but living motion itself. Something everybody should see”.¹⁰ After a year of reading about the new technology, residents of Omaha finally had a chance to experience it for themselves.



(Figure 2.2) Advertisement for the First Kinetoscope Showing. (*Omaha Daily Bee*, February 6, 1895)

Advertisements for the Kinetoscope continued to appear in Omaha’s newspaper for the next year. These advertisements quickly shifted to highlighting different aspects of the new amusement. By February, Kinetoscope proprietors began listing the features to be shown in the pictures that week. Popular clips played in Kinetoscopes were of boxing matches, or scenes from Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show.¹¹ The promoters of

motion pictures also quickly started catering their advertisements to women. New technologies and amusements may have attracted a particularly masculine audience, and Kinetoscope exhibitors wanted to attract all to their showings. Advertisements promoted Kinetoscope showings of dance clips, with phrases like, “A special invitation to the ladies”.¹² Attempts to make movies a place for both sexes would become a recurring theme in Nebraska theaters.

The Kinetoscope quickly proved popular. By March of 1895, Kinetoscope showings in Omaha had generated \$8,000 of revenue, or the modern equivalent of roughly \$225,000.¹³ However, despite the success of the device in Omaha, little evidence exists of showings in other Nebraska locations, except for brief showings in Grand Island (see Map 2.1). The Kinetoscope would soon be supplanted by another more popular device.

While the Kinetoscope proved the power of moving pictures to captivate and entertain, the device had its limitations. Due to viewing being restricted to a single peephole on each machine, only one person could view pictures at a time. Films could only last for seconds or a minute at most, because Kinetoscopes had limited space inside. Edison’s team of inventors were quickly working on another device that would majorly improve the cinema experience. In 1895, Edison unveiled the Vitascope.¹⁴ This device displayed motion pictures by projecting light onto a canvas. This method of playing films would prove to be the enduring one. It allowed films to be watched by crowds of spectators, and to become longer. Films from the introduction of the Vitascope until around 1905 were normally a few minutes long, showing a simple story

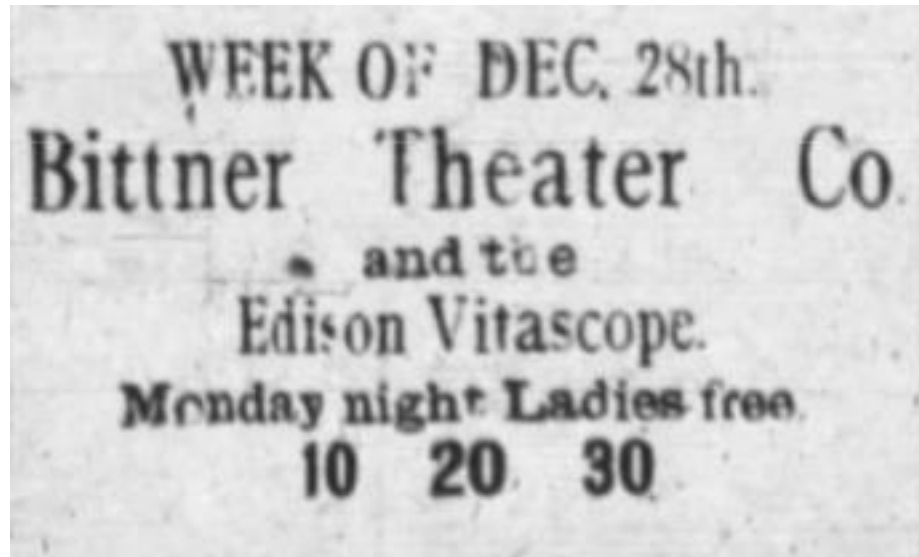
or event. Copies of the Vitascope were quickly distributed to entertainment venues across the country.



(Figure 2.3) Original Advertisement for the Vitascope
(Metropolitan Print Company, 1896)

Nebraskans read about the Vitascope in newspapers for several months before there were showings of it in their state, and they anticipated the marvel it would bring. The first reports about the Vitascope in Nebraskan newspapers appeared in April of 1896.¹⁵ Boyd's Opera House in Omaha held the first Vitascope shows in Nebraska in November of 1896.¹⁶ The descriptions of the Vitascope in advertisements show that Nebraskans viewed motion pictures as a modernizing force on the frontier. Advertisements claimed the Vitascope would "be exhibited in the same complete manner that characterizes Chicago and New York Productions".¹⁷ Nebraskans wanted amusements that would match those available in the most cosmopolitan cities. As with

the Kinetoscope, exhibitors tried to attract women to moving pictures shows, this time with free shows for ladies.¹⁸



(Figure 2.4) Vitascope Ladies Night (*Lincoln Journal Star*, December 23, 1896)

These Vitascope shows were widely lauded in the Nebraska press. A Lincoln newspaper describing Vitascope showings praised it by saying:

[The Vitascope] will convince any observing person that this machine is one of the most wonderful inventions of this most wonderful age. The scenes thrown upon the canvas background by this life producing machine are not pictures but living, moving human creatures, birds, animals, vehicle all perfect in form and movement surrounded by nature in perfect detail of color and form. It is hard to realize that one is simply witnessing a perfect reproduction of a scene where every detail is so perfect that the scene itself is before you.¹⁹

The Vitascope was also described as being a, “justly styled wonder of the Nineteenth century.”²⁰ The *Omaha Daily Bee* summed up the popular reaction to

moving pictures by writing, "Few attractions presented on any stage have ever been lauded so highly by press and public as this machine. It amazes, startles and delights by turns."²¹

The Vitascope connected Nebraska with other places, bringing new ideas and communication from around the world. The *Omaha Daily Bee* reflected on this by writing, "A glance at this list will show that many of the scenes are of foreign origin and to those who have never seen such a thing as French or Spanish military maneuvers or a royal party, these views will be doubly interesting."²² Scenes from Europe were fascinating to Nebraskans; the elegant and genteel nature of European society as portrayed in Vitascope films made Europe very attractive to Americans. Monarchy was a deeply foreign concept to Nebraskans, which gave these scenes an exotic allure. But anywhere unfamiliar to the ordinary folk of Nebraska could be captivating; even scenes as simple as views of the streets of New York were interesting.²³ Moving pictures showed people on the Great Plains activities they would never see in their real life, making places in Nebraska become connected to places elsewhere.

The Vitascope quickly spread across Nebraska, first gaining popularity in Omaha and Lincoln. The device had its first showings in Lincoln in December of 1896 at the Funke Opera House, located on the corner of O and 12th streets.²⁴ An article from January of 1897 indicates that most interested individuals in Lincoln and Omaha had seen the Vitascope at least once already.²⁵ The motion pictures were shown at opera houses and other venues for theatrical entertainment. Managers took great care that the first Vitascope showings would appeal to customers like traditional entertainment. A

typical Vitascope showing would show over ten individual films, and return customers were promised variety; as one newspaper wrote, “You are always sure of seeing three of four new ones.”²⁶

Moving pictures were often shown along with popular plays in the first few years. One theater advertised motion pictures to be shown with the premier of, “The Fire Patrol,” by James W. Harkins, a well-known playwright of the 19th century.²⁷ Regular staples of contemporary theater, such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, now had motion pictures to accompany them, blending the new technology with the classics of live entertainment. Moving pictures were also shown during breaks between performances.²⁸ An evening of entertainment could include a vaudeville act, then a motion picture projected on a canvas by a Vitascope, then finally a normal dramatic play.

Moving pictures began to spread elsewhere in the state in 1897. Motion picture projectors were sold under different brand names by that year, and businessmen could rent them to host showings in Nebraska towns. In January, Nebraska newspapers ran advertisements for motion picture projectors, promising renters would, “Make money fast and easy.”²⁹ The geographic spread of motion pictures in the late nineteenth century was thus heavily influenced by economic opportunity. Map 2.2 shows the spread of the Vitascope during the few months of its time in Nebraska. After success in Lincoln and Omaha, enterprising businessmen took Vitascoes to opera houses in the small towns Wahoo, West Point, Fremont, O’Neill, Superior, Central City and Falls City in March and April of 1897. The shows were popular and lucrative in these places, proving

the viability of moving pictures outside of large cities. Vitascope showings then spread like wildfire after April; the number of showings in later months and years are too numerous to count.

These first motion pictures were about a variety of subjects, and examining the content of early popular films provides insight about the interests of Nebraska audiences. Boxing films were a popular genre. The 1897 recording of a match between boxers James Corbett and Bob Fitzsimmons was highly popular in Lincoln.³⁰ Films about the Wild West were regular attractions, and relevant to Nebraskans of the nineteenth century. Films depicting military activities and war propaganda films were also prevalent. The *Omaha Daily Bee* described propaganda from the Philippine-American War by writing, "Then there will be moving pictures of the war in the Philippines, showing the retreat of the Filipinos from Manila, with Nebraska and Kansas boys in hot pursuit, firing as they run. This picture will show the natives shot down and dying in the ditches."³¹ Films about dance and art were popular among women who attended moving pictures. Religious films depicting biblical scenes were common as well.³² All of these original genres introduced in the Vitascope Era continued to be popular in later years.

After becoming an established part of amusements for Nebraskans, moving pictures were incorporated into entertainment and festivities in innovative ways. Moving pictures were used to raise money for various charitable causes. The McCook County Fair showed moving pictures as part of their amusements in August of 1897.³³ Opera houses gave away bicycles during moving picture showings, as cycling also

experienced an explosion in popularity in the late nineteenth century.³⁴ Exhibitors also experimented with novel methods of showing moving pictures, such as playing film backwards so viewers could see the world in reverse.³⁵ As moving pictures were integrated into place in Nebraska, they had to be adapted to fit the cultural norms and expectations of the viewing audience.

Rural Nebraskans had opportunities to watch moving pictures in the late 1890s, often through Chautauqua. Chautauqua was a national movement to bring cultural enrichment to rural communities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A professor described Chautauqua as, "A fraternal, enthusiastic, methodical, and sustained attempt to elevate, enrich, and inspire the individual life in its entirety, by an appeal to the curiosity, hopefulness, and ambition of those who would otherwise be debarred from the greatest opportunities of culture and spiritual advancement."³⁶ Moving images were considered a modern marvel, so they fit perfectly into this spirit of social improvement.

Chautauqua events were held in towns across Nebraska, in which orators gave educational and motivational lectures. Speakers included moving pictures in their talks to make the experience as modern as possible. For example, in 1897 Nemaha held a Chautauqua event, and the town newspaper wrote, "Three evenings will be devoted to the marvelous moving pictures."³⁷ Beatrice newspapers also frequently wrote about Chautauqua events that included moving pictures. Through cultural events like Chautauqua, Nebraskans quickly became accustomed to motion pictures as a regular facet of entertainment and education.

Motion pictures were included in Vaudeville shows that toured in Nebraska, meaning they were often associated with minstrel entertainment. From its inception, film had the power to shape and reinforce racial prejudices. Some of the earliest popular films were based on minstrel entertainment, such as *Watermelon Eating Party* from 1896, starring two men in blackface.³⁸ Motion pictures were included in variety shows with minstrel performances, such as in Omaha in December of 1897 when moving pictures were advertised alongside, “negro melodies.”³⁹ This association between film and racial stereotyping in Nebraska would continue for the next several decades (see Chapter 4).

Despite the widespread popularity of motion picture technology, concerns over the morality of the new artform quickly arose. Many Nebraskans, particularly those with strong religious convictions, were deeply concerned about the content of some films. Religious and moral concerns are also likely why early motion picture shows had trouble attracting female customers. The association between film and vaudeville did not help to alleviate these fears. For example, films that showed women in risqué clothing were deeply troubling to many. Amusements like circuses and vaudeville at the turn-of-the-century often had a reputation for vulgarity, so promoters of moving pictures worked to reassure potential audiences that their technology would only show that which was decent. In 1898, The *Omaha Daily Bee* wrote about film exhibitions in the city claiming, “All that is morbid, unhealthy, or luridly tragic or vulgar will be entirely barred.”⁴⁰ Later motion picture distribution in Nebraska would face similar challenges from those who were worried about the appropriateness of the films being played.

Nebraskans began experimenting with their own film production around the turn of the century. Perhaps the first film to be produced for public exhibition in Nebraska was a short subject of a Union Pacific train, shot by the American Mutascope and Biograph Company in 1899.⁴¹ Filmed near Columbus, it showed the Overland Limited, the flagship engine of Union Pacific, approach and speed by the camera for 45 seconds. The film later premiered in Omaha, with the *Omaha Daily Bee* writing, "It is a thrilling vision of rapid transit that brings a gasp to the throat of even the civilized being who lives at the end of the century."⁴² The technologies of locomotives and of motion pictures were combined to create this short, which made Nebraskans feel that they were on the cutting edge of technological advancements happening in the nation. This kind of filmmaking remained popular, as films about industry and economy were the most common type of early motion picture produced in Nebraska. Chapter 3 contains more examples of farmers and industrialists using film to document Nebraska's economy after 1905.

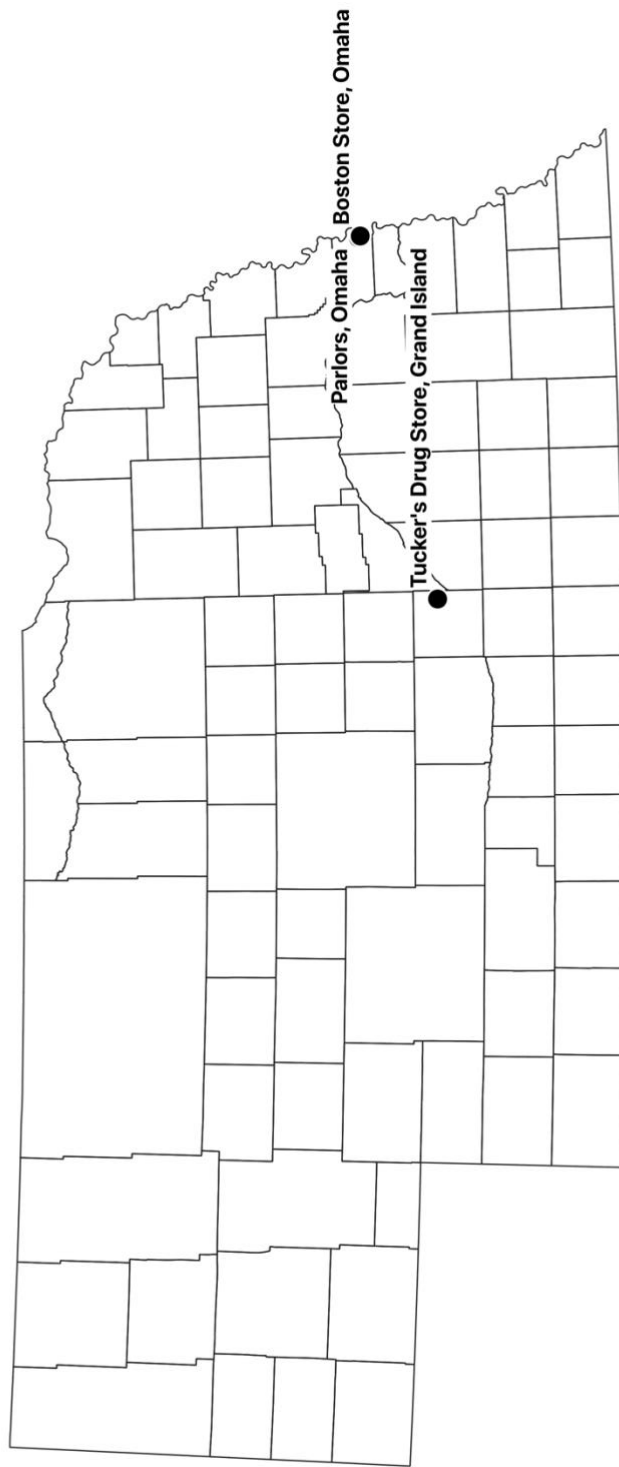
The Nebraska state government subsequently got involved in production of films about the state's economy. In 1904, the Nebraska legislature commissioned a motion picture exhibit for that year's World's Fair in St. Louis.⁴³ The legislature spent thousands of dollars to film various types of agriculture, including harvests of corn and wheat, cattle and pig husbandry, and the transport of crops and livestock. Eventually, 10,000 feet of film were collected, and a pavilion was built in St. Louis to show the footage. Over 50,000 World's Fair attendees visited the pavilion. Dubbed, "propaganda of the

corn,” the attraction proved the usefulness of motion picture technology to promote the industry of Nebraska.⁴⁴

By around 1905, significant changes were occurring in the business of film exhibition. Moving pictures were considered part of “modern life,” and it was clear they would be a regular part of entertainment and culture.⁴⁵ For the first several years of cinema, films and projectors were mobile. They were rented and brought to various venues, such as opera houses, or they were part of traveling entertainment troupes. This began to shift from 1905-10, when theaters were established for the sole purpose of showing films. Film had become popular enough that it did not need to be a part of any other entertainment; it was a worthwhile amusement on its own. This shift meant that film now had permanent fixtures on the Nebraska landscapes. Movie theaters were now part of the cultural environment.

Locations and Venues of Kinetoscope showings in 1895

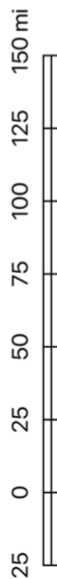
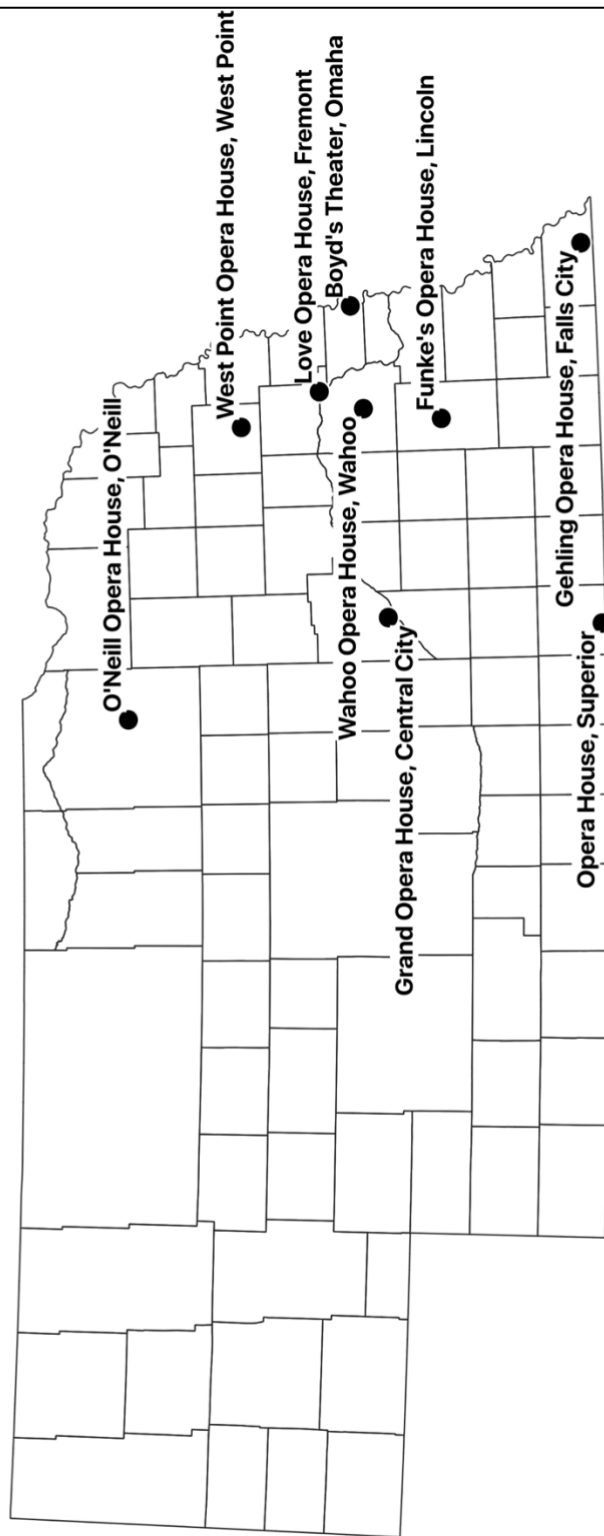
Map 2.1



Helmer 2022. County Boundaries from US Census Bureau

Locations and Venues of Vitascope showings from November 1896 through April 1897

Map 2.2



Helmer 2022

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- ¹ David Parkinson. *History of Film*. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 10-13.
- ² Jack Ellis. *A History of Film*. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 22.
- ³ Ellis, *A History of Film*, 1985, 23.
- ⁴ Ellis, 1985, 22.
- ⁵ *The Sioux County Journal*, April 19, 1894.
- ⁶ *The Sioux County Journal*, April 19, 1894.
- ⁷ "Edison's Latest Invention." *The Amelia Journal*, November 29, 1894.
- ⁸ Thomas Hughes, *American Genesis: A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm, 1870-1970*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 29.
- ⁹ "Edison's Kinetoscope." *The Omaha Evening Bee*, January 15, 1895.
- ¹⁰ "Edison's Kinetoscope." *The Omaha Evening Bee*, January 15, 1895.
- ¹¹ *Omaha Daily Bee*, February 6, 1895.
- ¹² *Omaha Daily Bee*, February 6, 1895.
- ¹³ "Do You Want a Moneymaker?" *Omaha Daily Bee*, Mar 19, 1895.
- ¹⁴ Charles Musser. "When Did Cinema Become Cinema?: Technology, History, and the Moving Pictures." In *Technology and Film Scholarship: Experience, Study, Theory*, ed. Hidalgo Santiago and Gaudreault André. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 33-50.
- ¹⁵ "Edison's Latest." *Seward County Democrat*, April 9, 1896.
- ¹⁶ "Amusements." *Omaha Daily Bee*, November 19, 1896.
- ¹⁷ "Amusements." *Omaha Daily Bee*, November 19, 1896.
- ¹⁸ *Lincoln Journal Star*, December 23, 1896.
- ¹⁹ "Theatrical Notes." *The Courier*, December 19, 1896.
- ²⁰ "Announcements." *The Nebraska State Journal*, December 27, 1896.

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- ²¹ "Amusements." *Omaha Daily Bee*, December 21, 1896.
- ²² "Amusements." *Omaha Daily Bee*, December 21, 1896.
- ²³ "Amusements." *The Evening Post*, February 5, 1897.
- ²⁴ *Lincoln Journal Star*, December 23, 1896.
- ²⁵ *The Courier*, January 30, 1897.
- ²⁶ "At The Funke." *The Nebraska State Journal*, February 3, 1897.
- ²⁷ "At the Funke." *The Nebraska State Journal*, January 6, 1897.
- ²⁸ "At The Funke." *The Nebraska State Journal*, February 3, 1897.
- ²⁹ "Advertisements." *Omaha Daily Bee*, January 17, 1897.
- ³⁰ "The Theatre." *The Courier*, September 25, 1897.
- ³¹ "Features of the Midway." *Omaha Daily Bee*, June 25, 1899.
- ³² "Passion Play Pictures." *Omaha Daily Bee*, May 15, 1900.
- ³³ "County Fair." *The McCook Tribune*, August 27, 1897.
- ³⁴ *The Omaha Evening Bee*, January 30, 1897.
- ³⁵ "Announcements." *Omaha Daily Bee*, July 13, 1899.
- ³⁶ Jesse Lyman Hurlbut. *The Story of Chautauqua*. (New York: G.P. Putman's Sons, 1921), xiv.
- ³⁷ "Talmage At Salem Chautauqua." *The Nebraska Advertiser*, August 8, 1897.
- ³⁸ Cara Caddoo. *Envisioning Freedom: Cinema and the Building of Modern Black Life*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 57-58.
- ³⁹ "Amusements." *Omaha Daily Bee*, December 27, 1896.
- ⁴⁰ *Omaha Daily Bee*, December 3, 1898.

⁴¹ "Taking Biograph Photographs of Mile a Minute Trains." *Omaha Daily Bee*, October 22, 1899.

⁴² "Taking Biograph Photographs of Mile a Minute Trains." *Omaha Daily Bee*, October 22, 1899.

⁴³ "Nebraskans at St. Louis." *Omaha Daily Bee*, August 8, 1904.

⁴⁴ "Nebraskans at St. Louis." *Omaha Daily Bee*, August 8, 1904.

⁴⁵ "Oberammergau Passion Play." *Omaha Daily Bee*, April 7, 1900.

CHAPTER THREE

THE NICKELODEON ERA IN NEBRASKA, 1905-1915

A profound change in the motion picture industry occurred around 1905. Motion picture shows changed from being transient entertainment to permanent fixtures in cities and towns across the country. In June of that year, a movie theater opened in Pittsburgh, with a piano to accompany films and admission costing five cents.¹ Because of the price, it was dubbed a nickel theater, or “nickelodeon.” The theater was successful, and nickelodeons were built all over the country. By 1908, there were 5,000 nickelodeons in the United States, drawing 80 million admissions every week.² Films were by then around 10 minutes long, and were one of the most popular entertainments of the era. Film was a cheap and easy way to spend time, and there were movies about such a variety of subjects that anyone could find films that interested them. This transformation of cinema occurred in Nebraska like it did in the rest of the country, permanently changing the state’s cultural and social landscape.

The Jewel Theater in Omaha was likely the first theater in Nebraska mostly dedicated to showing films. The theater opened on Douglas Street on December 17th, 1906.³ It primarily showed moving pictures, but it also had some live entertainment, such as children’s songs. The Jewel Theater also initially charged ten cents for admission, more than the normal nickelodeon cost.⁴ The theater was massively popular, drawing 830,000 admissions in the next eight months.⁵ The Jewel advertised itself to men, women, and children, and this approach to make movie theaters a place for all led

to tremendous financial success. The Jewel proved the viability of moving picture theaters in Nebraska, and many more were opened over the next few years.

During the next year, 1907, multiple more theaters were built in Nebraska, and Nebraskans recognized the profound change they were bringing. There were at least two more theaters built in Omaha in 1907.⁶ A theater was built in Kearney as well.⁷ A businessman in Bellevue attempted to open a theater there, but was delayed by technical issues.⁸ A Norfolk newspaper noted the significant change brought by the establishment of nickelodeons, explaining that there were thousands of a new type of business that did not exist just three years prior.⁹ Cultural life had shifted dramatically as a result. *The Nebraska State Journal* bemoaned the death of vaudeville and other live entertainment that nickelodeons were causing, noting, “It is because a man or a maid for a dollar can have the whole world as a peep show.”¹⁰ Films were much cheaper to produce, and they were cheaper to attend. This revolution in entertainment was also changing people’s worldviews.

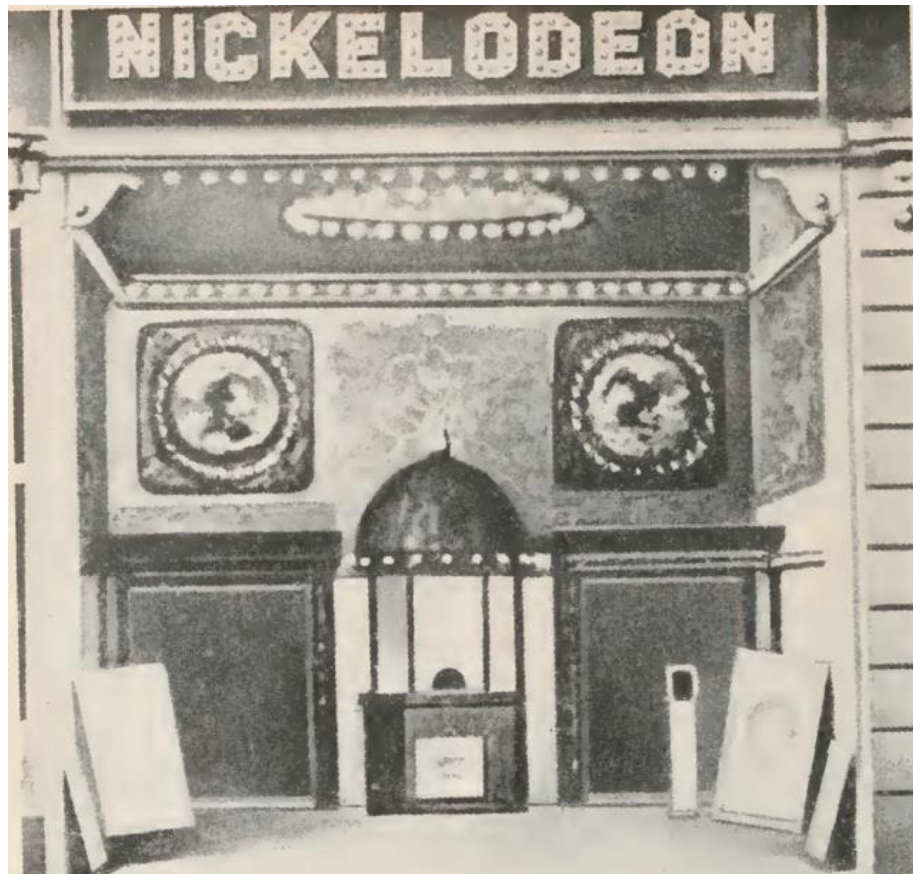
These theaters were bringing Nebraskans videos and images of places and events they had never before seen. To see actual recordings of anything that could be staged before the camera changed people’s view of the world, and made them feel more connected to everywhere else. As the *Omaha Daily Bee* wrote about film in 1907, “The world, from ‘the beginning’ to date, is now in procession before the people of Omaha and the west. All things— history, art, science, nature— of all times, ‘reproduced’ into moving pictures, are offered for optical consumption at ‘anti-trust’ prices.”¹¹ Those in this former frontier state were no longer isolated or separated from

global goings-on; they could witness it all at the local moving picture theater for only a few cents.

The number of nickel theaters in Nebraska exploded in 1908. In that year, there were five moving picture theaters established along Douglas Street in Omaha alone.¹² These theaters often opened quickly and did not operate for long. Theaters went out of business with little fanfare—they commonly relocated—and changes in name and ownership were frequent. All of this fluidity makes compiling accurate records about early nickel theaters next to impossible. Most lists of historic movie theaters do not begin until the 1920s, because the landscape for theaters in the Nickelodeon Era was subject to such frequent changes. Nebraska had hundreds of nickelodeons from 1906-1915, and the vast majority have been completely forgotten to history. While attempting to recover the names and locations of all of these theaters may be next to impossible, there are common accounts about nickelodeons that can be uncovered, and these reveal much about the movie-going experience for Nebraskans in the Nickelodeon Era.

Nickelodeons often featured elaborately decorated and gaudy storefronts. One Nebraska newspaper described them as, “dazzling white and of ornate design and near-art decorations.”¹³ The façade at the front of the business was decorated with paintings of film scenes, and they were combined with lights and balconies meant to evoke grand architecture. They were normally converted from the building’s previous business by adding this frilly exterior. There was a box office next to the doors, where a theater

employee sold tickets. However, once a patron actually went inside the theater, they would realize that the lavish entrance was deceptive.



(Figure 3.1) A typical nickelodeon entrance. (cinematreasures.org)

Upon entering the nickelodeon, the promise invited by the outside of the theater fell away. One of the most commonly noted aspects of nickelodeons was their dirty, uncomfortable, and unappealing interiors. *The Nebraska State Journal* described them as, "dark, dreary, and dirty." The general uncleanliness of nickelodeons was a common complaint against them. Newspapers frequently remarked on the, "dirty floors," present in nickel theaters.¹⁴ The seating in the nickelodeon was often cramped and hard to sit on for prolonged periods of time. The theaters were poorly lit, but the disregard of

cleanliness was still apparent to any who entered. It seems the low cost of the amusement was the only reason customers tolerated the substandard environment of the nickelodeon.

Of all aspects of the nickelodeon experience that were lambasted in the press, the most frequently complained about was the smell inside of the theaters. The “bad air,” in nickelodeons was enough to keep many customers away from the movies entirely.¹⁵ Most articles about nickelodeons contained some reference to the foul air present in them. Some theater owners took action about this, adding ventilation to their buildings and advertising clean air as an amenity at their nickelodeon. For example, when writing about a newly constructed movie theater, *The Nebraska State Journal* wrote, “The roominess of the house and its good air tempt hundreds to see the pictures who would not venture into an ordinary ‘Nickelodeon’ if they were paid to do it.”¹⁶ While the smell was the most unpleasant part of the early moviegoing experience, there was a more dangerous aspect to nickelodeons.

Fire made cinema a dangerous business in the early twentieth century, both in film distribution and in theaters. Film was made of highly flammable material at the time, so storing and transporting it was dangerous. Disaster struck in 1909 when a building used by an Omaha film distribution company burned down after a spark ignited film reels, causing a loss of \$75,000.¹⁷ Incidents like these made it difficult for those in the film business to find buildings and insurance.¹⁸ Another concern about nickelodeons was their lack of fire safety. Newspapers reported that nickelodeons were dangerous in the event of a fire, as there were often not enough exits to let crowds out in a panic.¹⁹

Later theaters were built to be safer in the event of a fire, and to have better seating and ventilation.

Racial segregation was routine in the early movie theaters and nickelodeons of Nebraska. Nebraska lacked formal laws and codes requiring racial segregation in public accommodations. This meant inclusion or segregation was decided by individual theaters and their owners. Many did choose segregation, and reports in the press reflect this. A concerned citizen wrote to *The Omaha Daily News* in 1915 to report on segregation at a local theater, saying, "There is one [movie theater] that has one aisle for white people and one for colored folks. I saw a colored woman humiliated by one of the fresh ushers yesterday."²⁰ This kind of segregation continued for decades.

Nebraska's first Black-owned theater, named the Loyal Theater, opened in Omaha in 1920, and played films of interest to the Black community.²¹ While movie theaters were an exciting amusement, they could not be equally enjoyed by all in the Nickelodeon Era.

The appropriateness and morality of films shown in nickelodeons was of concern to many, just like when film was first introduced (see Chapter 2). Dramatic films of the era often contained scenes of violence, showing criminal activity such as robberies and shoot-outs. This worried some Nebraskans, who thought these films might inspire similar real-life behavior, particularly among the youth. Efforts to place legal limits on moving pictures occurred throughout the Nickelodeon Era, with limited success. Educators and schools often pushed for greater censorship, along with religious organizations. In 1908, the Lincoln police chief banned theaters from screening films

that depicted violent crimes, such as murder and burglaries.²² This appears to be the first legal censorship of film in Nebraska.

The next year, the University of Nebraska conducted a study of the decency of amusements in Lincoln. The authors of the paper attended sixteen nickelodeon shows, and reported all they found objectionable. Thirteen of the films had drinking, three had, “not only drinking but drunkenness.”²³ Ten of the films contained depictions of kissing, and ten also contained scenes of violence.²⁴ The report goes on to describe the violent sequences in many films, such as scenes depicting fights, kidnappings, duels, explosions, and drownings. The research noted that young men and boys made up one-third of the moviegoing audience, and claimed they would be negatively influenced by what they see at the theater. The report concluded by calling for a committee to be created to censor motion pictures and other amusements in Lincoln.

Calls for greater legal control of motion picture content increased in the early 1910s. In 1912, the city council in Omaha considered creating a committee to, “take all necessary steps to prevent the carrying on of any amusement or entertainment which has a tendency to impair to destroy the good morals in this community.”²⁵ Around this time, states and cities across the nation were establishing censorship boards to regulate the content of motion pictures. It soon became a political issue as to whether Nebraska would follow suit.

In 1913, the Nebraska State Legislature attempted to pass a bill requiring each town to elect a censorship board comprised of a member chosen by the mayor, a member chosen by the local Board of Education, and a member chosen by the school

superintendent.²⁶ *The Moving Picture World* criticized this bill, calling it, “obnoxious,” and ending the report with, “Some bill, that.”²⁷ The bill failed to pass, with Nebraska’s film businesses assuring the public that they would self-censor any harmful content. The *Omaha Daily Bee* reported that a prominent Nebraska film company would not sell, “naughty pictures.”²⁸ *The Moving Picture World* also supported Nebraska’s film industry by publishing a letter from Omaha that described the city’s high quality theaters, and claimed that, “foreigners” owned the ill-reputable theaters.²⁹ Despite strong efforts from some, and unlike many other states, there was no official statewide policy for film censorship instituted in Nebraska prior to the national introduction of the Hays Code (the draconian legal code that restricted the content of movies from the 1930s through the 1960s), so until that time film remained controlled at the business-level, on an arbitrary basis.

During the Nickelodeon Era, film exchange companies were as important to the Nebraska motion picture industry as theaters. These companies rented reels containing films from the motion picture trust controlled by Thomas Edison, and distributed them to movie theaters. The Chicago Film Exchange initially provided most reels to Nebraska theaters, but around 1909 Nebraska businessmen organized exchanges of their own. The Omaha Film Company was one of the first, founded circa 1908. The company immediately moved to oppose the Edison Trust, which dominated the industry.³⁰ A representative of independent film companies met with Nebraska film exchange and theater owners in 1909, and encouraged them to resist the control imposed by Edison.

More Nebraska film exchanges were opened in the early 1910s. Companies such as the Monarch Film Company were lucrative businesses, valued at tens of thousands of dollars.³¹ These exchanges quickly accumulated economic power, so they formed the Nebraska State Board for film to advocate for the interests of the film industry. The heads of the exchanges held an extravagant convention at the Rome Hotel in Omaha on December 5th and 6th, 1912.³² *The Moving Picture World* praised the opulence of the occasion, with guests being treated to a grand banquet, live entertainment, and motion pictures.³³ The event rivaled what film exchanges in larger states were capable of, and legitimized the Nebraska film business. It was now operating as a professional community, and had moved past film's roots as a novelty or vaudeville sideshow.

The film business gained the respect of the broader Nebraska business community in the 1910s, as evidenced by the 1917 book, *Omaha: The Gate City and Douglas County, Nebraska—Volume 2*. A record of the progress of the city of Omaha, the book praises the work of entrepreneur Jake Mitchell, who founded a film exchange called the Laemmle Film Company in 1915. Regarding the exchange, the book states, "The Laemmle Film Service of Omaha has been one of the industries that has aided in bringing the motion picture business up to the high standard it now enjoys."³⁴ The work of those in the early film exchange business ensured motion pictures would always have a place in Nebraska's economy.

Nebraskans continued to experiment with film production and novel uses for motion pictures in the Nickelodeon Era. In 1908, a Nebraska man named C.W. Martin began creating films about crop farming in the state, for use at agricultural shows.³⁵ The

Omaha Daily Bee praised Martin for his innovations, saying that films for education were better than those with a, “sinful ballet show”.³⁶ The Nebraska Insane Asylum began showing films to patients in the early 1910s, to calm and entertain them.³⁷ *The Moving Picture World* reported on other early films made in Nebraska, such as footage of a clean-up effort after a tornado in Omaha.³⁸ Nebraskans used film to capture feats of industry, such as a 1913 motion picture produced in Plattsmouth documenting the transport of a large stack of bricks.³⁹ As with most films produced in the Nickelodeon Era, it is likely all copies of these Nebraska productions are lost, so they can only be studied through what was published about them. But these films and their use were important to the creation of modern cinema.

The early motion picture era was a dynamic time period, in which uses for film and the nature of film exhibition were variable and deeply different from modern moviegoing. The coverage of Nebraska filmmaking in national publications like *The Moving Picture World* indicates that Nebraskans contributed to a national culture of experimenting and innovating with film. It was during the first twenty years of movies that anyone, including farmers and businessmen in rural Nebraska, could change the nature of filmmaking by adding new ideas and techniques. However, changes would occur in the mid-1910s, and these marked a shift towards a cinematic culture that resembles the present.

A series of developments in the motion picture industry influenced Nebraska during the 1910s, most notably the emergence of feature films and the establishment of modern movie theaters. From the beginning of film until the end of the Nickelodeon

Era, narrative movies were short, with a maximum length of around 15-20 minutes. The stories were often chase sequences. They would begin with a crime being committed, then the wrongdoers would promptly be caught after a short pursuit by police or other authorities. Other films depicted people being rescued from some type of danger.

Movies at the nickelodeon were focused on a short, dramatic action. This changed in the early 1910s, as feature films became popular. Initially more common in Europe, feature films were over an hour in length. Their scope and scale were much broader than the simple stories told in nickelodeon films. Feature films gained American attention around 1912-1914, and became the norm after the immense success of the three hour-long epic *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 (see Chapter 4). The Edison Trust was broken up after 1915, which further allowed for more feature films. Movie theaters also changed as they began to accommodate feature films. Theaters started to charge more for admission, they upgraded their interiors, and overall became much more similar to modern theaters.

Nebraska publications noted the shift towards feature films. *The Omaha Daily News* commented on the shift to feature films in 1913, writing about movie theater managers: "there are a few who believe that there is a demand for a 'movie' house which shall play only 'feature' first run films."⁴⁰ Descriptions of new movie theaters built in the mid-1910s included mention that they would show only feature films.⁴¹ Few audience members would attend longer and grander films in nickelodeon quality venues, so new theaters had to be opened.

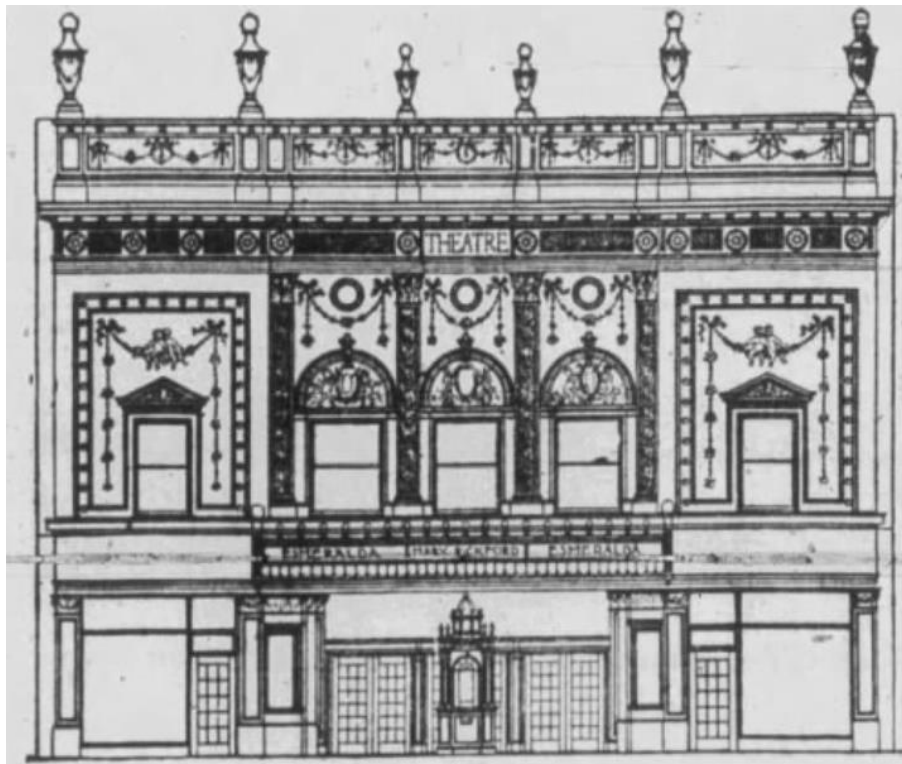
After 1910, investors poured massive amounts of money into theaters, so that by 1915, “movie palaces” with better conditions succeeded nickelodeons. One of the first of these was the Princess Theater in Omaha, built in 1911 for \$25,000, or \$600,000 in today’s money.⁴² The Princess seated 500 people, and was described as well ventilated. *The Moving Picture World* wrote that the tremendous profit from ventures like the Princess, “proves beyond a doubt the popularity of the moving picture in the West.”⁴³



(Figure 3.2) The Princess Theater in Omaha
(*The Moving Picture World*, January-June 1911)

Other theaters soon followed the model set by the Princess. The Empress Theater opened in late 1912 in Omaha, costing \$15,000 (\$440,000 today).⁴⁴ It was the first theater in the West to have an elevator.⁴⁵ The location of the Empress can be seen

on Map 3.1. Other Nebraska towns like Superior and Fairbury built upgraded theaters around this time, with seating for hundreds. This type of theater cost more, but for many it was worth the extra price. *The Omaha Daily News* reasoned that customers would be willing to pay a dime for a movie ticket at the right theater, writing, “this house must be attractive, sanitary, fireproof, at least constructively speaking, and dignified.”⁴⁶



(Figure 3.3) Plans for a New Move Palace in Omaha
(*The Omaha Daily News*, September 19, 1915)

The new type of movie theater flourished around 1915. Complaints about substandard fire safety measures in theaters continued, and theater owners had begun to feel public pressure to make their venues better.⁴⁷ Multiple new theaters were built

that year, with improved safety standards. The construction of an expensive Omaha theater was announced in September, with state-of-the-art amenities such as, “A ventilating system will propel fresh, filtered, cool air into the building in the summer and filtered warm air in the winter, and another system will extract foul air.”⁴⁸ Other businessmen building theaters in 1915 made similar promises, with sanitation and clean air the most common guarantee made for new theaters. Map 3.1 shows the locations of the new and improved movie theaters built in downtown Omaha from 1913-1916.

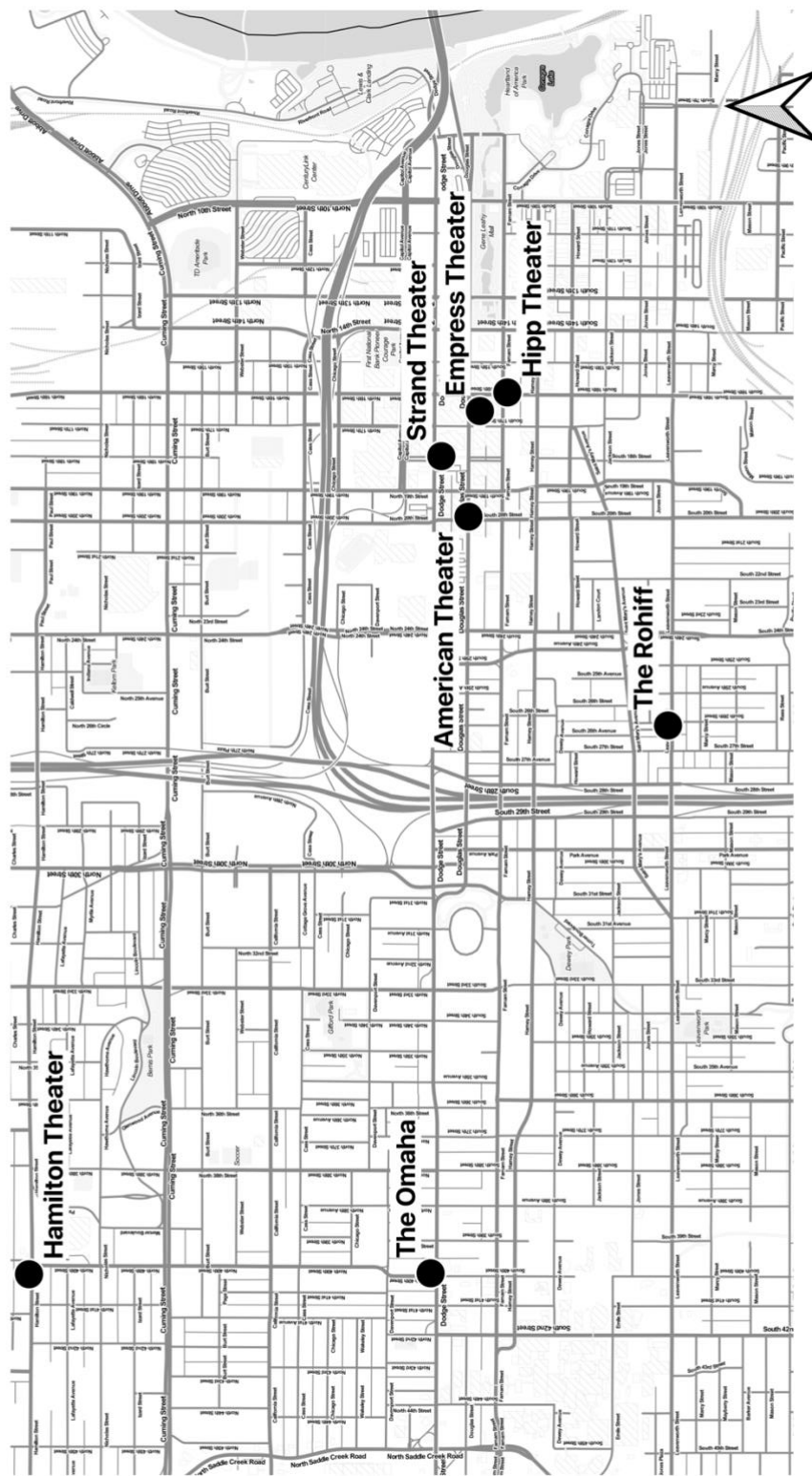
The end of the Nickelodeon Era was marked by ambitious investment in movie theaters, with bigger and better theaters being built across Nebraska. Some ideas for the future of cinema in Nebraska proved too lofty, such as the grandiose plans of the Rialto Amusement Company, an Omaha based entertainment company. In 1916, *The Moving Picture World* reported that Rialto had planned to spend \$250,000, or \$6 million today, to build the largest movie theater in the world.⁴⁹ The company also wanted to turn Ralston, Nebraska, which had 300 citizens at the time, into a moving picture city like a second Hollywood.⁵⁰ The goals of Rialto were quickly tempered by reality, but they reflect a time when movie theaters were the most exciting economic and cultural development, and to many at the end of the Nickelodeon Era there seemed to be no limits for the future of cinema.

Film came a long way during the first two decades of its existence. It came to Nebraska as a novelty and marvel of modern technology, before quickly transforming into an integral part of culture and entertainment. Film was added to the landscape by the creation of movie theaters, and became a staple of Nebraskans’ rhythms of life.

Ever since the first movie theater was built in 1906, going to the movies has been one of Nebraska's most common pastimes, and there can be no denial that film permanently changed the nature of place in the state.

Upgraded Movie Houses Built in Omaha From 1913 Through 1916

Map 3.1



Helmer 2022. Background Map Statmen Toner Used with a Creative Commons License.

¹ Gerald Mast and Bruce Kavin, *A Short History of the Movies, Seventh Edition*. (London: Longman, 2003), 47.

² Mast and Kavin, *A Short History of the Movies*, 47.

³ "Jewel Theater Ready Now." *Omaha Evening Bee*, December 14, 1906.

⁴ "Jewel Theater." *Omaha Daily Bee*, December 19, 1906.

⁵ "The Moving Picture Theater." *Omaha Daily Bee*, August 4, 1907.

⁶ "Trade Notes." *The Moving Picture World*, Volume One, March-December 1907, 374.

⁷ "Trade Notes." *The Moving Picture World*, Volume One, March-December 1907, 390.

⁸ "Trade Notes." *The Moving Picture World*, Volume One, March-December 1907, 468.

⁹ "Moving Picture Shows." *Norfolk Daily News*, November 25, 1907.

¹⁰ "Engulfed by Picture Show." *The Nebraska State Journal*, March 15, 1908.

¹¹ "The Moving Picture Theater." *Omaha Daily Bee*, August 4, 1907.

¹² Trade Notes." *The Moving Picture World*, Volume Three, July-December 1908, 288.

¹³ "Engulfed by Picture Show." *The Nebraska State Journal*, March 15, 1908.

¹⁴ *The Nebraska State Journal*, April 15, 1908.

¹⁵ "The Past Week." *The Nebraska State Journal*, April 11, 1908.

¹⁶ "The Past Week." *The Nebraska State Journal*, May 23, 1908.

¹⁷ "Photo Films Start Fire." *Omaha Daily Bee*, January 8, 1909.

¹⁸ *Omaha Daily Bee*, January 9, 1909.

¹⁹ "The Past Week." *The Nebraska State Journal*, April 11, 1908.

²⁰ "From a Movie Fan." *The Omaha Daily News*, March 27, 1916.

²¹ "Loyal Theatre Opens." *The Monitor*, May 27, 1920.

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- ²² "Trade Notes." *The Moving Picture World*, Volume Two, January-June 1908, 491.
- ²³ "Lincoln's Amusement's" *The Nebraska State Journal*, July 11, 1909.
- ²⁴ "Lincoln's Amusement's" *The Nebraska State Journal*, July 11, 1909.
- ²⁵ "City Council Proceedings." *Omaha Daily Bee*, April 4, 1912.
- ²⁶ "Another Censor Bill Killed." *The Moving Picture World*, Volume 16, April-June 1913, 710.
- ²⁷ "Another Censor Bill Killed." *The Moving Picture World*, Volume 16, April-June 1913, 710.
- ²⁸ "Great Detective Burns Poses for Movies." *Omaha Daily Bee*, March 14, 1913.
- ²⁹ "Something Else Again." *The Moving Picture World*, Volume 18, October-December 1913.
- ³⁰ "Film Men Watch Screens in Trust Fight." *Omaha Daily Bee*, April 7, 1909.
- ³¹ "Commissions Given Out." *Omaha Daily Bee*, December 22, 1913.
- ³² "Nebraska State Convention at Omaha." *The Moving Picture World*, Volume 14, October-December 1912, 1191.
- ³³ "Nebraska State Convention at Omaha." *The Moving Picture World*, Volume 14, October-December 1912, 1191.
- ³⁴ Arthur Cooper Wakeley, *Omaha: The Gate City and Douglas County, Nebraska. Volume 2* (Chicago: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1917), 616.
- ³⁵ "Motion Picture of Farming Methods." *The Moving Picture World*, Volume Three, July-Dec 1908, 82.
- ³⁶ "Farm Life at the Cornshow." *Omaha Daily Bee*, July 25, 1908.
- ³⁷ "Moving Pictures as a Cure For Insanity." *Moving Picture World*, Volume 6, January-June 1910, 376.
- ³⁸ "Universal." *Moving Picture World*, Volume 16, April-Jun 1913, 512.
- ³⁹ "Wrecking of a Stack of Bricks." *Moving Picture World*, Apr-Jun 1913.
- ⁴⁰ "Dime "Movie" Is On Way to Omaha." *The Omaha Daily News*, June 11, 1913.

⁴¹ "Strand Theater, New Movie Palace, Open to the Public." *The Omaha Evening Bee*, September 15, 1915.

⁴² "The Princess Theater." *The Moving Picture World*, Volume 8, January-June 1911, 252.

⁴³ "The Princess Theater." *The Moving Picture World*, Volume 8, January-June 1911, 252.

⁴⁴ *Moving Picture World*, Volume 14, Oct-Dec 1912, 650.

⁴⁵ "New Empress Theater to Have Elevator." *The Omaha Daily News*, December 22, 1912.

⁴⁶ "Dime "Movie" Is On Way to Omaha." *The Omaha Daily News*, June 11, 1913.

⁴⁷ "Says Movie Houses of Omaha are Unsafe." *The Omaha Daily News*. July 27, 1915.

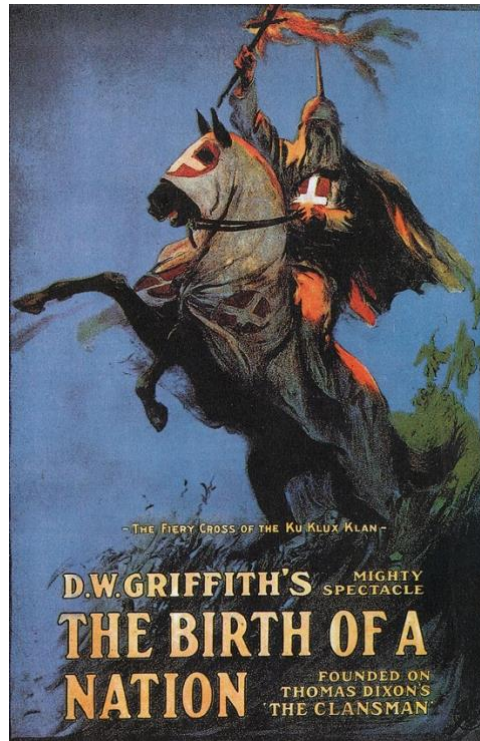
⁴⁸ "How Omaha's Newest Movie House Will Look." *The Omaha Daily News*, September 19, 1915.

⁴⁹ "In Nebraska." *Moving Picture World*, Volume 28, April-June 1916, 841.

⁵⁰ "In Nebraska." *Moving Picture World*, Volume 28, April-June 1916, 841.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BIRTH OF A NATION AND NEBRASKA



(Figure 4.1) *The Birth of a Nation* Theatrical Poster
(Epoch Film Company, 1915)

The immense popularity of film in the early twentieth century granted the medium tremendous power to bring new ideas to Nebraska, and to shape existing societal beliefs and prejudices. No motion picture did more to strength white Nebraskans' racial prejudice than D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). The film altered race relations in Nebraska by bringing the "Lost Cause of the Confederacy" to Nebraska, and legitimized anti-Black stereotypes in the minds of many white Nebraskans. The film debuted in Omaha in late 1915 and sparked a fierce legal battle,

then did the same later in Lincoln. It inspired a nationwide rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, including in Nebraska.

The Black populations of Lincoln and Omaha, along with their allies, fought fiercely against the influence of the film; this campaign was one of the first actions of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Nebraska. The actions of the Black community in fighting *The Birth of a Nation* created a lasting environment of activism in Nebraska. Black Nebraskans also responded to the film with artistic endeavors. George Johnson, a Black Nebraskan, helped found the Lincoln Motion Picture Company shortly after the release of *The Birth of a Nation*. This studio produced films featuring Black actors in uplifting roles, and told stories about Black excellence.

The origins of *The Birth of a Nation* were in the first years of the twentieth century. In 1905, white supremacist Baptist minister Thomas Dixon Jr. published a historical novel titled, *The Clansmen: A Historical Novel of the Ku Klux Klan*.¹ The novel presents a pseudohistorical revisionist version of the Reconstruction Era, with newly freed enslaved people taking political power in the postbellum South, then subsequently inflicting harm and tyranny onto the white population of the region, along with Black men committing sexual violence toward white women. The novel ends with the Ku Klux Klan, who are presented as a heroic and noble force, retaking control over the South by the oppression of Black people. Dixon worked to adapt the novel into a film over the next decade, with director DW Griffith joining the project in 1914.² Griffith turned the project into an epic, with grand battle sequences and drama.

The completed film, *The Birth of a Nation*, starts its narrative in the Antebellum South, and portrays enslaved people as generally happy in their condition of bondage.³ In the film's alternative history, the Civil War is the result of, "northern aggression," and Black union soldiers are shown attacking white women. After the end of the Civil War, Black lawmakers are depicted drafting legislation to marry white women. The next section of the film inspired the most outrage among anti-racist activists. It depicts a Black man named Gus attempting to rape a white woman, who takes her own life to escape. This concern about supposed Black sexual aggressiveness was prevalent in the early 20th century, and was a key argument the Klan would later use to recruit members.⁴ Gus is then lynched by the newly formed Ku Klux Klan. The Klan then "restores order" in the South by intimidating Black people into relinquishing political power.



(Figure 4.2) *The Birth of a Nation* Lynching Scene
(*The Birth of a Nation*, 1915)

The Birth of a Nation premiered in Los Angeles in February of 1915.⁵ The film instantly sparked controversy. The NAACP quickly protested the film's portrayal of Black people and its glorification of white supremacist violence.⁶ The film is based in the ideology of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, which holds that the Confederate States of America was a benevolent institution, and that the Northern States and Radical Republicans caused both the Civil War and Reconstruction Era violence.

Protests against *The Birth of a Nation* took place in cities across the country, with multiple locations banning the film, including the states of Ohio and Kansas.⁷ In the 1910s, there was no nationwide institution or laws for censorship of motion pictures, but most states and cities had censorship boards that made decisions about what was permissible. It was thought the First Amendment did not apply to films, as they were considered a commercial industry that could be regulated. Also, in the early twentieth century there was a higher cultural tolerance for governmental authorities regulating morality and decency in entertainment and amusement, compared to modern liberal attitudes towards media censorship. This led NAACP chapters across the country to call for local bans on the film. They argued the film would lead to violence against Black people, and that the violence and prejudice presented in the film were only tolerated because it was anti-Black.

Nebraska newspapers reported on the film throughout 1915, and many Nebraskans were immediately convinced by the film's narrative about the Civil War and

Reconstruction, even if they recognized the liberties the film took with the truth. The *Nebraska State Journal* praised the film, writing,

...most exciting of all, thrilling episodes during the period of negro domination in the southern states and its final wiping out by the mysterious Ku Klux Klan. For real dramatic interest, and its drama is so intense that it brings the audiences to their feet as no theatrical play has in many, many years, we are given in absolute action the great story of the contest between the races with the whites fighting for the honor of their women and their very lives, ranged on one side and on the other the negroes drunk with their new power and urged on by self-seeking politicians of the vilest sort.⁸

The *Nebraska State Journal* even acknowledged that the film distorted history to lionize the Klan, but it viewed this as an acceptable artistic decision, stating, “The Ku Klux Klan is shown only in its picturesqueness and in its credible accomplishments, so not so much can be claimed for accuracy in this respect, although the feature of course adds much to the effectiveness of the picture play and its dramatic interest.”⁹

Black-owned newspapers were one of the most important tools the Black community used in fighting *The Birth of a Nation*, and these publications were vital to this activism in Nebraska. As *The Birth of a Nation* built a reputation, Omaha activist and journalist Rev. John Albert Williams founded Nebraska’s most influential Black newspaper of the 1910s, *The Monitor*. Williams established the paper to represent the interests of, and provide information to, the 8,000 Black residents of Omaha. The

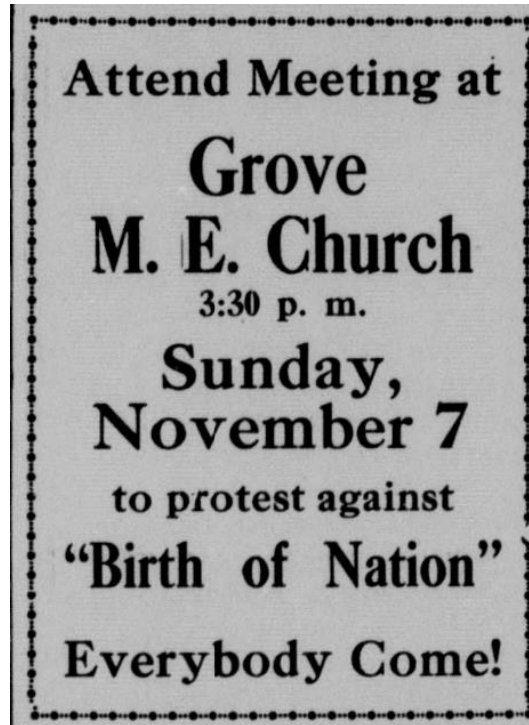
editors of *The Monitor* were leaders in Omaha's Black community, and community activism was primarily organized and carried out by the paper. The very first issue of *The Monitor*, published in July of 1915, reported on *The Birth of a Nation*, and described how it was banned by the city council of Pittsburgh.¹⁰ *The Monitor* continued to report on locations that banned the film for the next several years.

The first attempt to show *The Birth of a Nation* in Nebraska occurred in August of 1915, and this was also Omaha's Black community's first victory against the film. *The Monitor* learned of plans to bring the film to Omaha's municipal auditorium, and immediately organized to oppose that. Representatives from *The Monitor* met with acting mayor Dan Butler, explained the prejudice-inducing nature of the film, and warned that it may incite a riot.¹¹ Mayor Butler then wired the manager of the auditorium, and instructed him to not book the film. *The Monitor* celebrated this as a victory for Black people in Omaha, and commended city officials for their prompt response. However, despite the Black community's success in convincing the city government not to exhibit the film, privately owned theaters were still working to bring the film to Omaha.

Theater owners first successfully brought *The Birth of a Nation* to Nebraska in November of 1915, with newspapers reporting on the excitement for the coming attraction, saying, "nothing like its magnitude will ever be seen again."¹² The film would play at Brandeis Theater in Omaha, beginning November 14th.¹³ Admission was \$2, due to its scope and spectacle, more than an average ticket. The owner of Brandeis theater

was unaware that Omaha's Black community was prepared to fight the film, and was about to start a prolonged legal battle in Omaha.

In early November, a white reader of *The Monitor* tipped off the paper's editors of the plans to bring *The Birth of a Nation* to the Brandeis.¹⁴ *The Monitor* quickly moved to stop the film. On November 6th, *The Monitor* announced a protest meeting would be held the following day at the Grove Methodist Church. The paper argued that *The Birth of a Nation* would incite violence and hatred against Omaha's Black population. A significant part of the case made against the film was an appeal to public order and lawfulness. Black activists knew that local authorities may not care about an increase in race prejudice, but they would be fearful of a film that could cause riots and general disorder. *The Monitor* also heavily quoted white newspapers that opposed the film, as Black journalists realized that white opposition to the film might be more persuasive to the authorities in Omaha than the voices of the local Black community. The issue of *The Monitor* announcing protest of *The Birth of a Nation* stated, "Lest it may be thought that the colored people are too sensitive about this photo play, we have published on the front page of this issue an editorial from *The Kansas City Times*, which cannot justly be charged with being biased on behalf of the colored American."¹⁵



(Figure 4.3) Notice of the protest meeting against *The Birth of a Nation*
(*The Monitor*, November 6, 1915)

At the meeting on November 7th, Omaha's Black population voted to take whatever measures necessary to stop the showing of *The Birth of a Nation*, or at least have the most objectionable scenes removed. The meeting attendees created a multistep plan to fight the film, and organized several committees to achieve these goals. The committees planned to appeal to theater owners directly, to the city's Board of Public Welfare, and to white citizens at large to oppose the production.¹⁶ If these efforts failed, then the committees resolved to sue the city to prevent the showing of the motion picture, and to lobby for Omaha to pass an ordinance banning movies that would create, "racial or religious strife."¹⁷

On Wednesday, November 10th, representatives from *The Monitor* met with the manager of the Brandeis Theater, and asked him to remove two scenes from *The Birth of a Nation*, the scene of Gus attempting to assault a white woman, and the scene in which Gus's body is shown after he is lynched.¹⁸ The manager refused to remove either scene. One representative, named as Mrs. F. H. Cole, convinced the theater manager to include a printed statement in the program. This statement would, "call attention to the fidelity and exemplary conduct of the Negroes who were the protectors of the white women and children of the south during war times, and who never betrayed their trust."¹⁹

Sometime shortly after the protest meeting, Black citizens met with Omaha's mayor James Dahlman.²⁰ They presented to him language for an ordinance, prepared by lawyers from the NAACP, that would ban films which create racial prejudice. *The Birth of a Nation* brought racist ideas to Nebraska, but the activism against it also brought new nationwide anti-racist campaigns to the state, with the NAACP now acting in Omaha.

The ordinance read as follows:

Be it ordained by the city council of the city of Omaha:

Section 1.—It shall be unlawful for any person, firm or corporation to publicly show or exhibit in any place in the city of Omaha any picture or series of pictures by any device known as mutoscope, kinoscope, cinematograph, kinemacolor, penny arcade, moving picture or any vaudeville act, drama, play, theatrical song or stage or platform performance, or any advertisement or billboard display which tends to

incite race riot or race hatred or which shall represent or purport to represent any hanging, lynching, burning or placing in a place of ignominy, any human being, the same being incited by race hatred.

Section 2. Any person, persons, firm or corporation violating any of the provisions of this ordinance shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and on conviction thereof shall be fined in any sum not less than one dollar nor more than one hundred dollars.

Section 3. This ordinance shall take effect and be in force from and after fifteen days from its passage.²¹

Mayor Dahlman introduced this ordinance to the city council on November 11th.²² The city council recommended passing the ordinance, but they delayed voting on it until a month later, when *The Birth of a Nation* had already played in theaters for weeks.²³ Omaha's Black community interpreted this as a betrayal by the city council and the mayor.

The same day that the ordinance was announced, the *Omaha Daily Bee* published an article praising *The Birth of a Nation*, writing, "Mob violence and [negro] outlawry are depicted, followed by specular views of the Ku Klux Klan, who organized secretly to control the negroes through their superstitious fears...Acts of vengeance were perpetrated under the cover of darkness, and the pictures show clearly why such extreme measures were necessary for the continuance of law and order."²⁴ This indicates the extent to which the film convinced white Nebraskans to be sympathetic to

the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. The Ku Klux Klan was a lawless Southern institution that many Nebraskans would not have viewed favorably without media representations like those in *The Birth of a Nation*.

Other newspapers also supported the film, even when the threats of the motion picture were apparent. On November 6th, a Nebraska newspaper called *The Excelsior* reported on attacks on Black citizens in Kentucky that were inspired by *The Birth of a Nation*. It stated, "Distance and time lend enchantment and the followers of the 'invisible empire' of today do not have the halo of romance about them that marked the Clansmen of the early period, but if not promptly taken in hand they might degenerate into just such an organization."²⁵

<p>Studio Suite 1 and 2 Wood Building. Voices tried free by appointment. Voices trained from foundation to artistic finish. Telephone Red 4444</p>	<p>Recent outbreaks of lawless night riders in certain districts of Kentucky, who dragged both whites and negroes out of their homes and flogged them and administered other brutal punishment to them smacks of the old Ku Klux Klan methods that are so strikingly set forth in D. W. Griffith's photo spectacle, "The Birth of a Nation," which comes to the Brandeis theater Sunday night, November 14, for an indefinite run. This is the way it started, but constant success made the offenders bold and blood thirsty, and eventually flogging and ordinary maltreatment no longer satisfied them—and then common murder and every other devilish means of outrage were resorted to. Distance and time lend enchantment and the followers of the "invisible empire" of today do not have the halo of romance about them that marked the Clansmen of the early after-the-war period, but if not promptly taken in hand they might degenerate into just such an organization.</p>
<p>BRANDEIS THEATRE</p> <p>Week Beginning Tomorrow Matinee FAREWELL WEEK</p> <p>Edward Lynch And Associated Players In Virginia Harrod's Greatest Comedy Drama The Woman He Married</p> <p>Mats., 15c-25c; Evngs., 25c-35c-50c.</p>	<p>It is also said that the present night riders effect practically the same disguise as did the Ku Klux Klan—the long, ghostly hood and shroud and the white covering for their horses.</p> <p>This adds a new impetus to the doings of the original Ku Klux Klan, as depicted in "The Birth of a Nation," and will strike a note of reality to those newer genera-</p>
<p>Beginning Sunday Nov., 14th FIRST SHOWING OF THE MIGHTY SPECTACLE D. W. GRIFFITH'S</p> <p>THE BIRTH OF A NATION</p> <p>TWO SHOWS DAILY Matinees 2:15 Evenings 8:15</p> <p>PRICES NIGHTS: 50c 75c \$1.00, \$1.50 \$2.00 MATINEE: 25c 50c 75c, \$1.00, \$1.50</p>	

(Figure 4.4) *The Birth of a Nation* advertisement directly next to an article about it inspiring racist violence. (*The Omaha Excelsior*, November 6, 1915)

The editors of the paper placed this article directly next to an advertisement for *The Birth of a Nation*. Despite knowing that *The Birth of a Nation* would bring harm to Black people, many white Nebraskans continued to support it.

Some white newspapers were sympathetic to Omaha's Black community. However, their support often wavered when discussing actions the black community took to oppose the film. *The Omaha Nebraskan* wrote an editorial opining that, "It is really a pity that any plays which stir race prejudice should be presented to the public."²⁶ The editors acknowledged that it was wrong to propagate glorification of white supremacy, but they also opposed the Black community's response to the film writing, "The law suit which the colored people of Omaha recently brought in protest against a certain production was doubtless a welcome bit of advertising to the enterprising manager. Mass meetings, too, only serve to help draw public attention to the play."²⁷ The *Newsman* believed instead Black citizens should respond to racist films with, "dignified silence."²⁸

The film premiered in Omaha on November 14th, and archives show it received immediate popular acclaim. Much fanfare was made of the actor Joseph Henabery, originally from Omaha, who played President Lincoln.²⁹ *The Omaha Daily Bee* wrote about it proclaiming, "It will make you love. It will make you hate; It will charm and thrill you beyond your belief to be either charged or thrilled. It will stir your fire, patriotism and blood, and make you yell and cry and groan, It will force you to grasp the back of the seat in front of you until your fingers ache, and then relax them as some touching, tender scene appears."³⁰ Several weeks later the *Bee* continued, "'The Birth of a

Nation." which, with its superb and inspiring musical setting, rendered complete by a symphony orchestra of a score of musicians. Its bewildering sound and light and color effects, is still drawing crowded houses at the Brandeis theater."³¹ Publications such as this raved about the picture with as much praise as could be given.

The film had immediate cultural impact, as the grand scope and spectacle of the film persuaded many white Nebraskans to sympathize with the Confederacy and the Ku Klux Klan. Newspapers reported the narrative from *The Birth of a Nation* as fact, with plot descriptions such as, "From this the scene changes to ante-bellum days, depicting the conditions of the negroes in the south at that time. Then comes the turmoil of war, and, finally, the rule of black over white, with a mulatto lieutenant governor in the capital of South Carolina and the Ku Klux Klan riding through the country-side to rescue their women and preserve their traditions," and "Acts of vengeance were perpetrated under the cover of darkness, and the pictures show clearly why ' such extreme measures were necessary for the continuance of law and order. In point of interest the Klansmen spectacles rival the war aspects of the graphic photoplay."³² The biases of many writers were laid bare, writing reviews such as,

"Women are menaced by the black minions of the northern white or attacked, whites are driven from the streets or insulted. Home are invaded. Justice is a forgotten thing. The land knows no law but that conceived by the race then in control. Then- the chivalry of the whites is given new life. The Ku Klux Klan is formed. These riders of the night, in ghostly white, rally by dozens, by score and hundreds and thousands.

They ride like the wind. They strike without even the warning the rattlesnake gives and are far more deadly.”³³

Audiences were elated by the violent act of the Klan, with Nebraska audiences clapping at the “Dixie song,” and shouting “rebel yells,” during screenings of the film.³⁴ This was considered evidence that, “the spirit of the south still lives.”³⁵ The film brought unwavering support for the Klan in Nebraska, as critics proclaimed, “The uncanny call of the Ku Klux Klan made goose pimples rise... The thrill and dash of the charging clansman calls for wild applause.”³⁶

The fight against the film continued after it premiered at the Brandeis. The city council voted on November 19th to urge the Brandeis management to cut the sexual assault scene from the film. However, this had no legal power as the ordinance was not yet in place.³⁷ A committee of ten Black citizens then filed a petition before a Omaha judge to have the film halted; this was denied as the judge argued it was a legislative matter.³⁸ This judge also owned a theater in Omaha, and *The Monitor* suspected this may have influenced his decision. In a letter to the city government of Omaha, John Albert Williams described the film as, “un-American, un-Christian, indefensible,” and declared, “We appeal directly to you to stop this AS YOU WOULD FIND A WAY TO STOP ANYTHING ELSE YOU REALLY DESIRED TO STOP.”³⁹ The message was clear, *The Birth of a Nation* was only tolerated because of the group it choose to target. Anything as violent or prejudiced against a non-marginalized population would not have been allowed in Omaha.

The film remained popular, and those who supported it largely ignored the protests of Omaha's Black community. One of the few responses the film exhibitors made to the opponents of the motion picture was an advertisement in November that read, "'The Birth of a Nation' is history. Is this not sufficient! The play has been passed by the National Board of Censors and is showing in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, St. Louis, and several other cities. The supposition that its showing should be prohibited because of its representation of the negro during the reconstruction period is immaterial. The negro of 1866 and 1915 are vastly different."⁴⁰

During the initial Omaha run of *The Birth of a Nation* in November and December, diverse individuals and groups protested against it. Letters to the editor from Omaha residents suggested changes to the film so as not to defame Omaha's Black citizens.⁴¹ Members of an Omaha women's club spoke out against the film, expressing concern that it would increase race prejudice.⁴² The Omaha Socialist Party wrote a letter to *The Monitor* supporting opposition to *The Birth of a Nation*, and signed off with, "We are always glad to extend the right hand of comradeship to our colored fellow workers, and give them a standing invitation to be present at our meetings and to take part in them."⁴³

Along with waging a legal battle over *The Birth of a Nation*, Omaha's Black community and their allies fought a rhetorical conflict to sway popular perception against film. The *Omaha World Herald* published an editorial written by Nebraska senator Gilbert Hitchcock, in which he criticized the narrative of *The Birth of a Nation*.⁴⁴ He argued that whites should also be criticized for their actions throughout history,

though he still believed some of what the film presented about the Reconstruction Era. *The Monitor* reprinted and praised this editorial. The *Omaha Daily News* intentionally misrepresented the words of Black attorney H.J. Pinkett in an interview about the film, and Pinkett had to issue a correction through *The Monitor*.⁴⁵ *The Monitor* issued vivid rebukes of *The Clansmen* author Thomas Dixon, such as,

“We cannot refrain from observing that Dixon does not pay a very high compliment to the noble women of his race when he implies, as his words would indicate, that colored men are so attractive to them that they must be taught abhorrence of them. But doubtless he is too stupid to see the reflection in his words, as he is to perceive that his desire to ‘have all Negroes removed from the United States’ is impracticable.”⁴⁶

The ordinance against films inspiring race prejudice finally passed on December 21st, five days before *The Birth of a Nation* ended its Omaha run.⁴⁷ By December, roughly 85,000 people in Omaha had seen the film.⁴⁸ Omaha’s Black community developed a deep distrust and resentment for the, “spineless” city officials of Omaha for letting the film run its course.⁴⁹ These feelings were heightened when Ku Klux Klan chapters began appearing in the United States, after decades of not existing as an organization.⁵⁰ But the conflict in Omaha would not reach its peak until the next March.

The Brandeis Theater booked *The Birth of a Nation* for a return engagement in March of 1916. In anticipation of this, John Albert Williams sent a complaint to the city council, asking them to enforce the new ordinance. In response, the superintendent of the police told the Brandeis not to show the film.⁵¹ The Brandeis carried on showing the

film regardless. Two days later the manager of the Brandeis was technically arrested by being required to appear before an Omaha judge.⁵² The judge then quickly ruled the film did not violate the ordinance. *The Monitor* responded with outrage, as the ruling clearly violated the ordinance, with *The Birth of a Nation* showing a lynching, which was expressly prohibited.⁵³ The events in Omaha were covered in the national film trade publication *The Moving Picture World*, which reported on the conflict between John Albert Williams and the Brandeis without adding commentary.⁵⁴

The film played in Omaha for several more weeks, and returned multiple times over the next several years. The Black community mounted resistance toward any theater that attempted to bring the film back. A return showing of *The Birth of a Nation* was legally blocked in 1919.⁵⁵ A Black delegation appealed to the city government to cut short a run in 1924, citing the 1915 ordinance.⁵⁶ The city government of Omaha may have more readily responded to the concerns Black community after noticing the effects of the film in ensuing years.

The actions of the Omaha city council and Mayor Dahlman during the initial run of *The Birth of a Nation* permanently strained their relationships with the Black community. *The Monitor* generally supported Dahlman. However, for the next several years any time the paper praised him the editors included a mention of his failure to block *The Birth of a Nation*.⁵⁷ Omaha was not the only Nebraska city that faced controversy over Griffith's epic.

The Birth of a Nation first came to Lincoln in January of 1916.⁵⁸ Lincoln newspapers engaged in more blatant racial prejudice as they described the film,

compared to their Omaha counterparts. The *Lincoln Journal Star* advertised the plot of the film with a glowing description of its pro-Confederacy themes, and described freedmen in the South as, “free n*****.”⁵⁹ The *Nebraska State Journal* described a Radical Republican politician as a, “negro lover,” and wrote that it was necessary for the Klan to rescue women from the “brutal negro.”⁶⁰

The small Black population of Lincoln and their allies brought protests against the initial screening of *The Birth of a Nation*, but were largely ignored. In mid-January a group of white and Black ministers applied to the city council to stop the film, but they were unsuccessful.⁶¹ The film continued to play in Lincoln for the next several months.

The most significant controversy over *The Birth of a Nation* in Lincoln occurred several years later, in 1918. By this time, Lincoln’s Black citizens had founded an official NAACP chapter. In June, the secretary of the Lincoln chapter sent a letter to the head office of the NAACP, writing that a return showing of *The Birth of a Nation* was scheduled in Lincoln, and that Lincoln’s Black citizens were acting to prevent another run of the film.⁶² They appointed a committee to send a protest to Mayor John Miller. The Mayor immediately took action to “prohibit said play or those parts which are so obnoxious to our people.”⁶³ The mayor referred the case to Attorney General Willis Reed, who brought an injunction against the film in court.⁶⁴

An important facet of the activism against the film in Lincoln was the visit of Mary Talbert, a famous orator and president of the National Association of Colored Women. Talbert happened to be traveling to a convention in Denver from her home in New York, and spent a week in Lincoln assisting the NAACP chapter.⁶⁵ Talbert presented

the case against the film to Lincoln Judge Flansburg on June 29.⁶⁶ The argument against the film remained the same—it would create race prejudice and potentially incite violence and riots. She was later present with other Black citizens for a screening of the film at the Rialto theater on July 2. Judge Flansberg was also there to make a final determination.⁶⁷

Judge Flansburg issued his decision after the screening, ruling that the second half of *The Birth of a Nation* could not be shown in Lincoln.⁶⁸ The first half of the film played in Lincoln as scheduled. The Black community of Nebraska celebrated this as an important victory. *The Monitor* praised the city officials of Lincoln, while further condemning the city officials in Omaha for their comparative lack of action.⁶⁹ The Lincoln chapter sent John Shillady, Executive Secretary of the NAACP, a letter celebrating their success, and included a newspaper clipping detailing their fight against the film.⁷⁰ Shillady sent a letter in reply thanking them for the update.⁷¹ The field secretary of the Nebraska NAACP sent the Lincoln chapter a letter praising them for their work against the film.⁷²

Aside from Omaha and Lincoln, *The Birth of a Nation* played at theaters and opera houses in many smaller towns in Nebraska. The film was not met with social and legal challenges in these towns like it was in Nebraska's largest cities. Rural areas of Nebraska did not have large enough Black populations to raise opposition to the film. The film was popular wherever it played in Nebraska, with many towns excitedly anticipating the coming of the picture for months. The film had a significant social impact in Nebraska's rural areas, similar to that in Omaha and Lincoln. Nebraskans

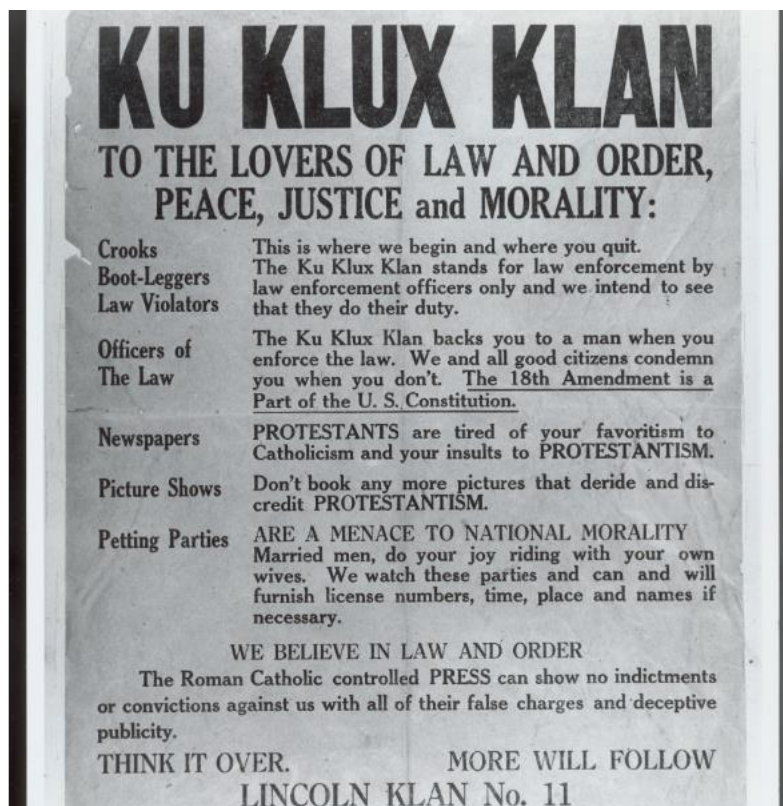
across the state mythologized the Antebellum South, just as the filmmakers intended. See Maps 4.1-4.3 for the locations where *The Birth of a Nation* played during the first six months of its time in Nebraska.

The influence of *The Birth of a Nation* and the campaign against it had lasting impacts in Nebraska. The film increased racial prejudice against Black Nebraskans, and a few years later the city of Omaha faced a devastating race riot. The picture created an atmosphere of sympathy for the Confederacy and the Ku Klux Klan, and this contributed to the rebirth of the Klan in the 1920s.

The heightened racial tension of the 1910s eventually boiled over into the Omaha race riot of 1919. The Black population of Omaha grew in the 1910s, and *Omaha Bee* began to report sensationalized accounts of Black men attacking white women.⁷³ The *Bee* reported these alleged accounts of Black violence as part of an alliance with Omaha political boss Tom Dennison.⁷⁴ In September, this culminated in the lynching of Will Brown, a Black man accused of raping a white woman. A mob surrounded the courthouse where Brown was held, and forced the Omaha police to hand over Brown by setting the building on fire and threatening to shoot anyone that left.⁷⁵ Brown was subsequently killed and his body mutilated. The fears of Omaha's Black community about mob violence were proven correct.

The Ku Klux Klan was reborn in the United States in the late 1910s and early 1920s. A new Klan was founded in the South in 1915, capitalizing on the success of *The Birth of a Nation*.⁷⁶ By the early 1920s, the Klan had expanded into a national organization with millions of members. This new Klan held a broad set of beliefs,

opposing immigration, racial equality and Catholicism, while supporting temperance and tradition. The Klan's leaders used *The Birth of a Nation* for recruitment and developed their rituals based on it. The popularity of the film in Nebraska helped the Klan establish a foothold there as well. The Klan began organizing in Nebraska in 1921, and by 1924 it had 45,000 members in the state.⁷⁷ In 1925, the Klan held a parade in Lincoln which included 1,500 marchers and featured cross burnings.⁷⁸ Nothing of this scale would have been possible in Lincoln without the cultural impetus of *The Birth of a Nation*.



(Figure 4.5) Klan Poster from Lincoln.
 (History Nebraska 18568)

The Klan faded from Nebraska in the late 1920s, after newspapers drew attention to the financial corruption of the organization and its promotion of violence.⁷⁹ Historian Michael Schuyler wrote of the end of the Nebraska Klan, saying, “The rallies and parades, no longer glamorous and exciting, had become commonplace and boring. The mystery, the majesty, the purity were gone.”⁸⁰

The opposition organized against *The Birth of a Nation* also had a profound impact in Nebraska. This campaign was the first major action of the NAACP in the state, and it established the organization as a powerful force in Nebraska’s legal and cultural matters. The Nebraska NAACP branches continued to fight for racial justice after their work against *The Birth of a Nation*. The organization supported anti-lynching legislation in the 1920s. One event they held as part of the anti-lynching campaign was a free movie screening for Black students.⁸¹ During the ensuing decades, the Nebraska NAACP fought racial discrimination in public accommodations, and defended Black citizens wrongly accused of crimes.⁸² This activism in the first half of the twentieth century set the stage for the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s.

The Black community emerged from the fight against *The Birth of a Nation* with a desire to create their own films. In 1916, Omaha postman George Johnson cofounded the first Black owned movie studio to produce feature length films.⁸³ He and his brother Noble Johnson of Los Angeles created the Lincoln Motion Picture Company (LMPC), named after Abraham Lincoln, to produce films that positively represented Black people. An advertisement selling stock in the studio read, “The Lincoln Motion Picture Company, Inc., of Los Angeles, is the ONLY producing company at present that is actually

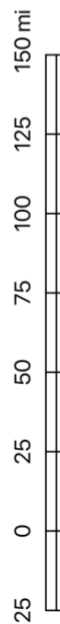
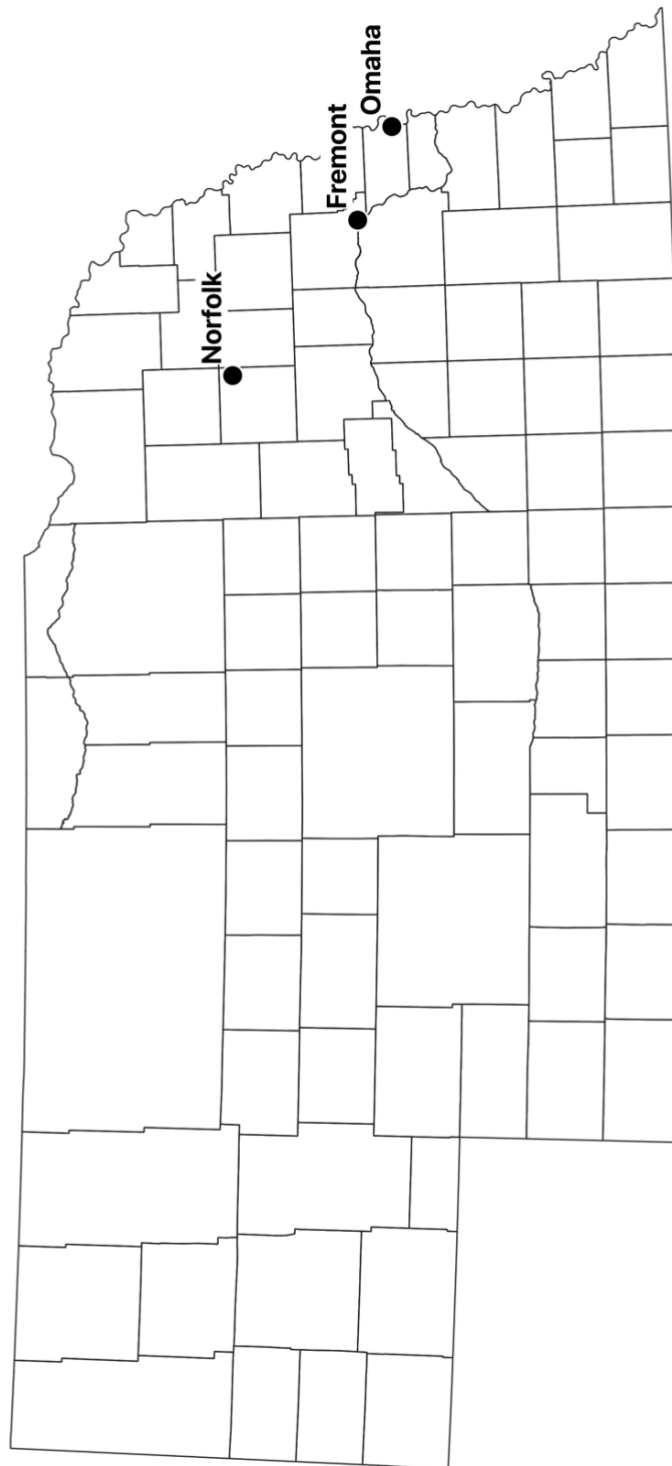
producing high grade motion pictures featuring the Race in photoplays of merit minus all humiliating burlesque.”⁸⁴

The LMPC produced its first feature, *The Realization of the Negro's Ambition*, in 1916.⁸⁵ The Black press praised the LMPC for making a film that positively portrayed the Black experience. The LMPC made four more films over the next five years. The pictures were popular among Black audiences across the country. While remaining a full-time postal worker in Omaha, George Johnson operated as the booking manager for LMPC, scheduling their pictures in theaters across the nation.⁸⁶ The company closed in 1923 due to high operating costs.

The legacy of *The Birth of a Nation* in Nebraska remains multifaceted. The film brought violence and racial tension to the state, convincing Nebraskans of a propagandized version of history. The Black community in Nebraska emerged from their fight against the film organized and ready to take on future challenges by use of the legal system and by swaying public opinion. The Black community also created important art and business activity in response to the film. Through the powerful example of *The Birth of a Nation*, it is clear that film has shaped the social and culture landscape in Nebraska since its infancy, and continues to hold the power to do so, today.

Cities with *The Birth of a Nation* Theatrical Runs in December 1915

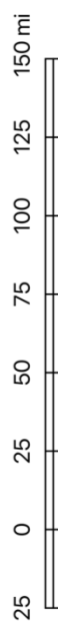
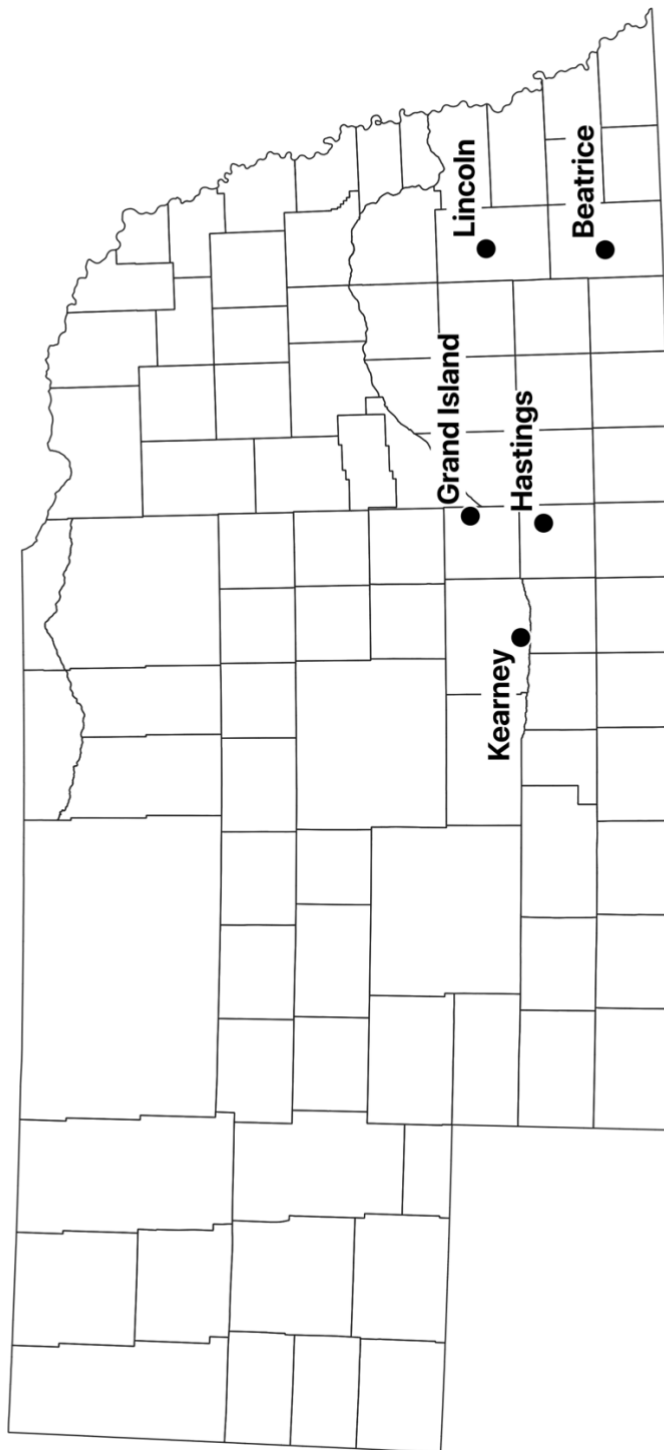
(Map 4.1)



Helmer 2022. County Boundaries From US Census Bureau

Cities with *The Birth of a Nation* Theatrical Runs in January 1916

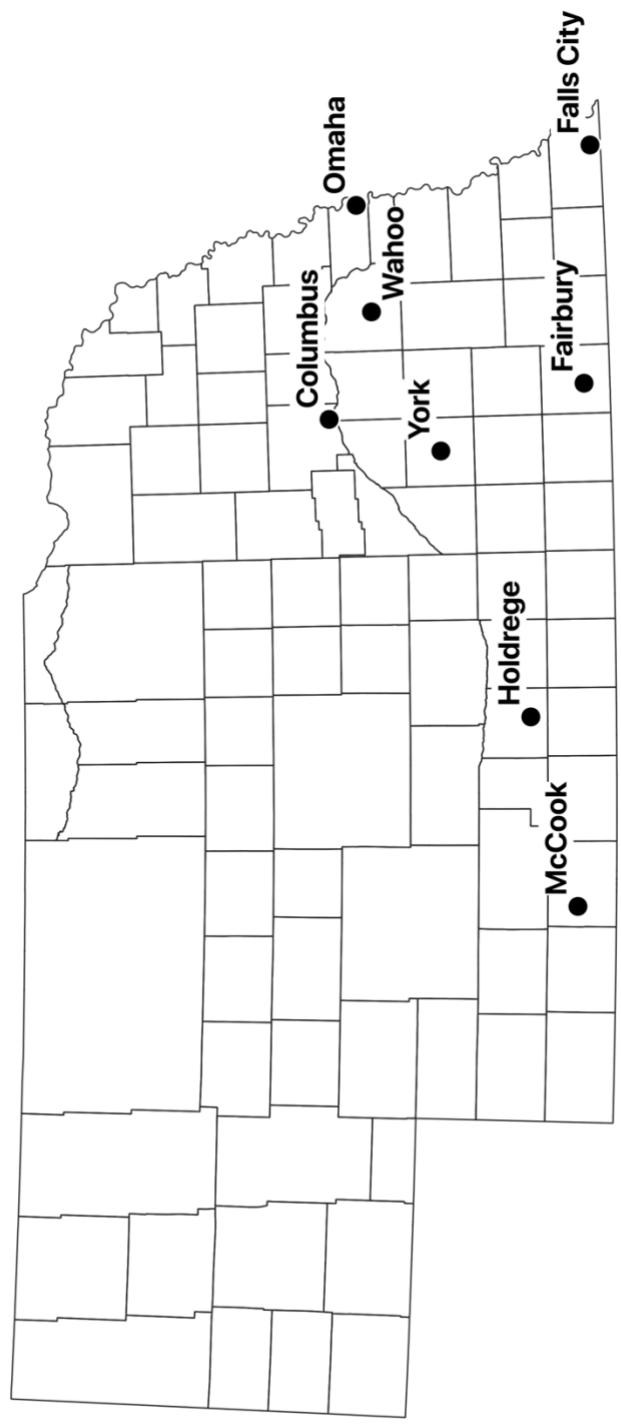
(Map 4.2)



Helmer 2022

Cities with *The Birth of a Nation* Theatrical Runs in February–April of 1916

(Map 4.3)



Helmer 2022

¹ Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's the Birth of a Nation: A History of the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 43.

² Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's the Birth of a Nation*, 81.

³ *The Birth of a Nation*. Directed by D.W. Griffith. Los Angeles: David W. Griffith Corp, 1915.

⁴ Linda Gordon. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. (New York: Liveright, 2017), 40.

⁵ Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's the Birth of a Nation*, 15.

⁶ *Fighting a Vicious Film*. Boston: Boston Chapter of the NAACP, 1915.

⁷ Stokes, *D.W. Griffith's the Birth of a Nation*, 6.

⁸ "Plays and players." *Nebraska State Journal*, March 14, 1915.

⁹ "Plays and players." *Nebraska State Journal*, March 14, 1915.

¹⁰ "Pittsburgh City Council Goes on Record Against Prejudicial Plays." *The Monitor*, July 3, 1915.

¹¹ "Prejudice Provoking Photo-Play Prohibited." *The Monitor*, August 8, 1915.

¹² *The Omaha Daily Bee*, November 6, 1915.

¹³ "Will Omaha Permit Dixon's Photo Play?" *The Monitor*, November 6, 1915.

¹⁴ "Will Omaha Permit It?" *The Monitor*, November 6, 1915.

¹⁵ "Will Omaha Permit It?" *The Monitor*, November 6, 1915.

¹⁶ "Favor Opposing Dixon's Photo Play." *The Monitor*, November 13, 1915.

¹⁷ "Favor Opposing Dixon's Photo Play." *The Monitor*, November 13, 1915.

¹⁸ "Favor Opposing Dixon's Photo Play." *The Monitor*, November 13, 1915.

¹⁹ "Favor Opposing Dixon's Photo Play." *The Monitor*, November 13, 1915.

²⁰ "The Facts of the Fight." *The Monitor*, March 25, 1916.

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- ²¹ "Mayor Dahlman Introduces Ordinance." *The Monitor*, November 13, 1915.
- ²² "Mayor Dahlman Introduces Ordinance." *The Monitor*, November 13, 1915.
- ²³ "The Facts of the Fight." *The Monitor*, March 25, 1916.
- ²⁴ *Omaha Daily Bee*, November 11, 1915.
- ²⁵ "Music and Drama News." *The Excelsior*, November 6, 1915.
- ²⁶ "Race Prejudice Plays." *The Omaha Nebraskan*, September 18, 1915.
- ²⁷ "Race Prejudice Plays." *The Omaha Nebraskan*, September 18, 1915.
- ²⁸ "Race Prejudice Plays." *The Omaha Nebraskan*, September 18, 1915.
- ²⁹ *The Omaha Daily Bee*, November 12, 1915.
- ³⁰ "'Birth of a Nation' Stripped Down to Fighting Strength." *The Omaha Daily Bee*, November 12, 1915.
- ³¹ "Liberty and Union, Is Message of the Birth of a Nation" *The Omaha Daily Bee*, November 28, 1915.
- ³² "Liberty and Union, Is Message of the Birth of a Nation" *The Omaha Daily Bee*, November 28, 1915.
- ³³ "Ku Klux Klan Was a Terror During the Reconstruction." *The Omaha Daily Bee*, November 21, 1915.
- ³⁴ "'Birth of a Nation' is Full of Applause." *The Omaha Daily News*, November 22, 1915.
- ³⁵ "'Birth of a Nation' is Full of Applause." *The Omaha Daily News*, November 22, 1915.
- ³⁶ "What Omaha Critics Say." *The Omaha Daily Bee*, November 21, 1915.
- ³⁷ "Council Urges One Scene Be Removed from Big Picture." *The Omaha Daily Bee*, November 19, 1915.
- ³⁸ "An Open Letter to Mayor Dahlman and the City Commissioners." *The Monitor*, November 20, 1915.
- ³⁹ "An Open Letter to Mayor Dahlman and the City Commissioners." *The Monitor*, November 20, 1915.
- ⁴⁰ "Why Censor It" *The Omaha Daily Bee*, November 11, 1915.

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- ⁴¹ "Letters to the Editor". *Omaha Daily News* November 17, 1915.
- ⁴² "Women protest on 'The Birth of a Nation'." *The Omaha Evening Bee* November 24, 1915.
- ⁴³ "Socialists Approve." *The Monitor*, November 20, 1915.
- ⁴⁴ "Whites not Negroes are Responsible." *The Monitor*, November 27, 1915.
- ⁴⁵ "Attorney HJ Pinkett Misquoted by the Omaha Daily News." *The Monitor*, November 27, 1915.
- ⁴⁶ *The Monitor*, November 13, 1915.
- ⁴⁷ "The Facts of the Fight." *The Monitor*, March 25, 1916.
- ⁴⁸ *Omaha Daily Bee*, December 16, 1915.
- ⁴⁹ "Still Opposing It." *The Monitor*, December 11, 1915.
- ⁵⁰ "Where Will It End?" *The Monitor*, December 25, 1915.
- ⁵¹ *Omaha Evening Bee*, March 20, 1916.
- ⁵² *Omaha Evening Bee*, March 22, 1916.
- ⁵³ "Foster's Decision Insults Intelligence of Citizens." *The Monitor*, March 25, 1916.
- ⁵⁴ "Judge Had Seen Picture." *The Moving Picture World*, April 1916.
- ⁵⁵ "Showing of 'Birth of a Nation' Prohibited." *The Monitor*, July 31, 1919.
- ⁵⁶ "'The Birth of a Nation' Cuts Short its Showing in City." *The Monitor*, March 14, 1924.
- ⁵⁷ "Vote this ticket Thursday." *The Monitor*, May 5, 1918.
- ⁵⁸ "Amusement Announcements." *The Lincoln Star*, January 17, 1916.
- ⁵⁹ "Amusement Announcements." *The Lincoln Star*, January 13, 1916.
- ⁶⁰ *Nebraska State Journal*, January 20, 1916.
- ⁶¹ "Ministers Had Not Seen Picture." *The Lincoln Star*, January 20, 1916.

⁶² Correspondence From Secretary McWilliams to NAACP, 25 June 1918, RG1254.AM, NAACP, History Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska.

⁶³ Correspondence From Secretary McWilliams to NAACP, 25 June 1918, RG1254.AM, NAACP, History Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska.

⁶⁴ "Decision Against "Birth of a Nation" In Court." *The Monitor*, July 6, 1918.

⁶⁵ Correspondence From Secretary McWilliams to National Association Secretary John Shillady, 3 July 1918, RG1254.AM, NAACP, History Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska.

⁶⁶ "Lincoln News." *The Monitor*, July 6, 1918.

⁶⁷ "Decision Against "Birth of a Nation" In Court." *The Monitor*, July 6, 1918.

⁶⁸ "Decision Against "Birth of a Nation" In Court." *The Monitor*, July 6, 1918.

⁶⁹ "Congratulations to Lincoln." *The Monitor*, July 13, 1918.

⁷⁰ Correspondence From Secretary McWilliams to National Association Secretary John Shillady, 3 July 1918, RG1254.AM, NAACP, History Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska.

⁷¹ Correspondence From National Association Secretary to Secretary McWilliams, 3 July 1918, RG1254.AM, NAACP, History Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska.

⁷² Correspondence From Field Secretary to Secretary McWilliams, 3 July 1918, RG1254.AM, NAACP, History Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska.

⁷³ Orville Menard, "Lest We Forget: The Lynching of Will Brown, Omaha's 1919 Race Riot," *Nebraska History* 91 no. 3 & 4 (Fall/Winter 2010): 155.

⁷⁴ Menard, "Lest We Forget," 157.

⁷⁵ Menard, "Lest We Forget," 159-160.

⁷⁶ Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 11-12.

⁷⁷ Michael Schuyler, "The Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska, 1920-1930," *Nebraska History* 66, no. 3 (Fall 1985): 235.

⁷⁸ Schuyler, "The Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska, 1920-1930," 236.

⁷⁹ Schuyler, "The Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska, 1920-1930," 252-253.

⁸⁰ Schuyler, "The Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska, 1920-1930," 253.

⁸¹ Zachary Wimmer, "Triumphs and Troubles: The Early History of the NAACP in Nebraska, 1918-1940," *Nebraska History* 101, no. 4 (Winter 2020): 169.

⁸² Wimmer, "Triumphs and Troubles," 170-172.

⁸³ Henry Sampson. *Blacks in Black and White: A Source Book on Black Films*. (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1977), 27-39.

⁸⁴ "The Secret of Getting Rich." *The Kansas City Sun*, May 19, 1917.

⁸⁵ Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White*, 27.

⁸⁶ Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White*, 35.

POSTSCRIPT FILM IN MODERN NEBRASKA



(Figure 5.1) The former Gehling Theater in Falls City, Nebraska
(cinematreasures.org, 2013)

Film first came to Nebraska in the late 1800s. It started with devices that one person looked into to see images in motion. Vitascope came next, projecting short scenes for crowds in opera houses. After that nickelodeons were established as the first businesses that just showed movies. These nickelodeons were entertaining, but left much to be desired in terms of customer experience. Finally, in the mid-1910s, movie theaters were constructed, and played films as we know them now.

Much has changed since the days of vitascope and nickelodeons. After the creation of movie theaters in the first two decades of the 20th century, the theater industry saw the rise and fall of roadshow films, drive-ins, video rental stores, 3D, and many other trends in entertainment. The single screen theaters of the past have now

largely been replaced with multiplexes. While theaters have evolved through all of this, in modern times the very existence of theaters has been questioned. Recent events and changes in consumer behavior have led many to fear for the future of the theatrical experience. But theaters are still relevant to Nebraska's cultural landscape, and theaters will continue to adapt to the challenges of modern times.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a major hardship for theaters in Nebraska. Theaters were shut down for months, and after they finally reopened attendance and profits were far below previous amounts. Combine this with the competition of the internet and streaming film releases, and it becomes clear that theaters no longer hold hegemony over cinema like in the past. But as people are returning to public life, they are returning to the theater. The experience of the movie theater offers too many benefits to discount, from the visual presentation, to the sound system, along with getting to see the latest blockbusters in crowds full of adoring fans. When theaters foster this atmosphere, people will come no matter how circumstances change in moviemaking.

I will conclude this thesis by reflecting on my personal experience at a Nebraska theater, and explain why I believe theaters are still important to Nebraska's cultural life. I grew up attending the Rivoli Theater in my hometown of Seward, Nebraska. The Rivoli has been open for over 100 years in the same building on the historic square of downtown Seward. Residents of Seward adore the theater, with its reasonable prices and small-town charm. The owners and staff are well-known and highly regarded in the



(Figure 5.2) The Rivoli Theater in Seward, Nebraska
(Helmer, 2022)

community. The Rivoli has two screens, and still rents DVDs, making it one of the last businesses in Nebraska to do so. The theater gets first-runs of major films, so on opening night of any highly anticipated movie, the Rivoli will be packed. The theatrical experience is unique in Seward, because those who attend mostly know each other, and will get to see movies with friends and acquaintances whenever they go to the theater.

When the pandemic began, the Rivoli had to temporarily close its doors. I was concerned about the future of the theater. But the community came together to ensure that it would reopen stronger than ever. The theater sold t-shirts and popcorn during the quarantine months, and Seward's residents enthusiastically purchased them to support the theater. The theater was also given a business grant by the city government

during the pandemic year to help them remodel and improve their facility. The theater eventually opened back up, with social distancing and mask requirements at first. The crowds came back, and before long it was business as usual in the theater. I have attended several premiers in the recent months, the theater was back to normal as a place for entertainment and socializing in the heart of Seward.

APPENDIX A
LOCATIONS OF *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* SHOWINGS, 1915-1917

Venue Name	Location	Date of Original Showing
Brandeis	17th Street and Douglas, Omaha NE	Nov-15
Empress Theater	419 N. Main Street, Fremont NE	Dec-15
Norfolk Auditorum	122 N. Fourth Street, Norfolk NE	Dec-15
Oliver Theater	145 N. 13th Street, Lincoln NE	Jan-16
Kearney Opera House	Central Avenue & 21st Street, Kearney NE	Jan-16
Paddock Theater	516 Court Street, Beatrice NE	Jan-16
Kerr Opera House	743 W. Second Street, Hastings, NE	Jan-16
Liederkrantz	401 W. 1st Street, Grand Island NE	16-Jan
York Opera House	625 N Grant Ave, York, NE	Feb-16
Gehling Theater	Falls City, NE	Feb-16
Steele Opera House	Fairbury, NE	Feb-16
Brandeis	17th Street and Douglas, Omaha NE	Mar-16
North Theater	2402-6 13th Street, Columbus, NE	Mar-16
Sokol Theater	12th Street and Norman Avenue, Crete, NE	Mar-16
Wahoo Opera House	Wahoo, NE	Mar-16
The Temple Theater	McCook, NE	Apr-16
Holdrege Opera House	Holdrege, NE	Apr-16
Wayne Opera House	Wayne, NE	Sep-16
Keith Theater	412 N. Dewey Street, North Platte, NE	Oct-16
Queen Theater	1621 Broadway, Scottsbluff, NE	Oct-16
Majestic Theater	615 N. Washington Street, Lexington, NE	Oct-16
Imperial Theater	410 Box Butte Avenue, Alliance, NE	Oct-16
Tobin Opera House	Sidney, NE	Oct-16
Pace Theater	Chadron, NE	Oct-16
Janecek Theater	12th Street and C Street, Schuyler, NE	Nov-16
New Lyric Theater	Broken Bow, NE	Nov-16
Marha Ellen Auditorium	Central City, NE	Nov-16
Garland Theater	Loup City, NE	Nov-16
D.F.B. Opera House	Blair, NE	Dec-16
Opera House	Gothenburg, NE	Dec-16

Seward Opera House	Seward, NE	Jan-17
Kerr Opera House	743 W. Second Street, Hastings, NE	Jan-17
The Temple Theater	McCook, NE	Jan-17
Parmele Theater	Plattsmouth, NE	Jan-17
Opera House	Minden, NE	Jan-17
Opera House	Wilber, NE	Feb-17
Swan Theater	2707 13th Street, Columbus, NE	Apr-17
Opera House	Syracuse, NE	Apr-17
Orpheum Theater	1621 Broadway, Scottsbluff, NE	Jun-17
Imperial Theater	410 Box Butte Avenue, Alliance, NE	Jun-17
Colonial Theater	Dorchester, NE	Aug-17
Opera House	Arlington, Ne	Aug-17
Opera House	Clarks, NE	Sep-17

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