

Father's Day Thoughts of My Movie Loving Dad

Father's Day is almost over, but at various times during the day I have been thinking of my father, who died back in the 80s. Much of my reflection has been in connection with my love for and writing about the movies since my first review appeared in the Catholic monthly *Marriage & Family Living Magazine* in 1977. At most of my film workshops someone has asked how did I, a pastor, become so interested in the movies. My answer has been my father back when I was growing up in Indianapolis. I trace my interest to my Dad, in two ways, though I seldom go into the second one at public gatherings.

First, my Dad loved movies so much that in the early 1940s he bought a 16mm sound projector and on weekends would rent and show movies in our basement. Often neighbors would join us, sometimes to watch a musical or romance, often, to my preference, a cowboy film. That would usually be a Saturday night, because on Friday nights the three of us (I was an only child) usually shopped at the A&P, went across the street to eat supper, and while finishing our meal, looked at the newspaper movie section to see what was playing at our neighborhood theater. (We didn't have to worry about milk sitting out in the car because the milkman delivered it right to our home in those bye-gone days.)

I always pulled for a war or cowboy film, but put up with a "mushy" love story. The guy—Clark Gable, Cary Grant, and such—made these films endurable for a kid who rather would have seen John Wayne or Randolph Scott shoot it out with the bad guys. There were always an A and a B feature film, a newsreel, a cartoon, and a "Selected Short Feature," so it was pretty late when we left the theater. I usually fell asleep in the back seat, not waking up until morning, when I found myself clad in pajamas in my bed.

We even found our taste for movies satisfied on radio, the Lux Radio Theater being a favorite program we always made time for. The show managed to condense a 90-minute movie into an hour format, and almost always with the original stars recapping their roles. How could I not come to love the moves?

The second way in which my father was responsible is not so pleasant. I was in the 5th grade when my mother filed for divorce because of Dad's infidelity. This was a wrenching time when for a while I became convinced that God does not answer prayers, even if he exists at all. My housekeeper mother had to find employment outside the home because the child support payments were not enough for rent and everything else. For several years we lived with my grandmother in her downtown Indianapolis apartment, first near the main library, and then a few blocks south closer to the downtown business section. This meant that I was alone a lot after school, my grandmother being a self-employed beautician with a parlor in a busy office building. The public library, the wonderful secondhand bookstores, and the movie theaters were places where I spent many magical hours that fueled my imagination—and made me forget all of my family concerns. In the movies at the time, the warring man and wife might come close to divorcing, or even if they did, you could count on them getting back together by the end of the film.

In those days there were 7 or 8 theaters downtown, some of them charging \$.75 to \$1.00 for "first run" movies, and several "second run" theaters, such as the Ohio and Ambassador, my favorites because they showed lots of B-movie Westerns and detective films, charging just \$.25. Popcorn cost just a dime, so a kid could have a great time lasting 3 to 3 1/2 hours, all theaters back then showing two feature films, a cartoon, a newsreel, and a 15-20 minute short feature. It was at the St. Clair Theater that I first walked out before the conclusion of a movie. The 2nd World War was on then, and like most of my friends, I eagerly sought out every war movie that

came out. The 1943 film *Bataan* was showing, but it was about a valiant defeat of our guys, not the victory that I was used to seeing. Robert Taylor played a leader of a squad ordered to blow up a bridge and slow down the Japanese advance upon the Bataan Peninsula. One by one the American soldiers die—and I just couldn't stand to see all of them perish, no matter how bravely. Just too much for an 8 year-old (I'm pretty sure it was 1944 when the film finally came to that 2nd run house.)

When I reached the age of 12 I worked summers for news stand owner Willy Silverman, who payed the princely sum of \$2 for an hour in the morning, and later in the afternoon \$2 for another hour of managing sales while he was delivering morning and afternoon papers throughout the downtown area.

The news stand I worked at when I was 12 was right outside the tallest building then in the city, The Merchants Bank Bdg. The Ohio wasn't "deluxe," but it was a favorite theater.

Making \$4 a day, I was able to save half of it (at my mother's insistence) and still have plenty to buy second-hand books or get into t he 2nd-run theaters. This did not make up for the heartache of being able to see my Dad only a day or two a week, but it still enabled me to see far more movies than most boys my age.

And so, as this Father's Day draws to a close, I have many good memories of my Father who introduced me to movies at home before I even was old enough to go to a theater.

Thanks, Dad!