

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

The Gem Theater: *Bay Rat High Culture*

By David Frew
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Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker, grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In a new series of articles for the Jefferson, the retired professor takes note of life in and around the water.



A film poster from 1935 shows Gene Autry, his sidekick Smiley Burnett, and several alien bad guys. It is amazing how much their head gear looks like ordinary galvanized steel buckets with fins on them. But we didn't notice esoteric costuming issues when we were kids.

I was attending a virtual concert a few weeks ago and, during dead time before the music began, the computer screen was filled with a funky old, black and white, test pattern that seemed quite familiar. The circle on the screen said "Gene Autry, Radio Days." After the concert was over, I used my "Googler" to search the singing cowboy and his movies and what I found sent me down a "rabbit hole" of 1950s memories.

Radio Days was a 1940 re-release of a previously serialized, 12-part Gene Autry movie called the "Phantom Menace." And it was one of the exciting serialized features at our neighborhood film emporium, the Gem Theater in the 500 block of West Fourth Street, an ambitious four-block trek from my home. One of a dozen neighborhood movie houses in Erie during the 1950s, it was owned by a wealthy (I assumed) out-of-town entrepreneur from Titusville. That must have been what you did with oil wealth after the boom in those days, we thought.

Admission was 5 cents for kids, and a dime for adults, making it an affordable weekend entertainment venue at the time. The formula at the Gem was typical for the off-brand movie theaters of the day. A double feature, cartoons, a newsreel, and, most exciting of all, the serial thriller that would keep kids coming back, week after week. The big fancy downtown theaters, Warner, Sheas, Columbia, and Strand, were too far away and too expensive for most of us back then. Some of them had admission prices of as much as 25 cents. Add in the bus ride downtown and such an experience was beyond the reach of some of us. Besides, they didn't have exciting serials. Just regular movies with big-time film stars.

The Gem was open only during the day on weekends. They were also closed Monday through Wednesday and showed films one time per evening during the rest of the week. But for us kids, the important showings were on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. There were 300 seats in the house, a 5-cent candy machine in the entry hall, and a 7-cent pop machine right next to it. Imagine a vending machine that holds a nickel and two pennies in its plunger, then dispenses a choice of four kinds of soft drinks in tiny bottles. With a total of 17 cents (three nickels and two pennies) a kid could take in the double feature with friends, enjoy candy, and have a soft drink. Has anyone been to a regular theater lately to notice the price of movie snacks?

The highlight of the weekly cultural experience was the formula film presentation at the Gem. There was always a newsreel, often touting the strength and power of post-World War II America, which had managed to kick the snot out of both the Germans and the Japanese. I often wondered how neighborhood German kids felt when they watched. Then the cartoon. Old-time stuff like Mickey Mouse or Tom & Jerry. And then the thrilling double feature. Films with stars that no one had ever heard of, with another cartoon sandwiched in the middle. Between the features, the projectionist had to re-load, which gave 300 kids a chance to rush the machines for more candy and pop.

Finally, after the forgettable second feature, the screen would come to life with a serialized adventure. Superman, Buck Rogers, or a cowboy movie that had somehow been sliced into 10 or more parts. We always walked home, talking about how we wished that we could see the entire serialized adventure at one time without wondering what was to follow. Each episode ended at a precarious moment such as a damsel in distress who had been lashed to railroad tracks by Snidely Whiplash or some other equally dastardly character. The lasting impact of these melodramas became evident years ago as I watched H. Jack Langer create brilliantly conceived local commercials for his plumbing business. Jack is a contemporary and was a Bay Rat like myself before he became an enormously successful entrepreneur. His success was clearly related to his skillful creation of a series of seemingly amateurish, local television commercials. The seemingly homemade part is what created his success. Jack Langer is a marketing genius. Of all his advertising campaigns, the “hot water tank in a skirt, tied to a railroad track” was my personal favorite. Just before the train comes along to annihilate the hapless tank, Super Jack comes to the rescue. It is a plot straight out of the Gem Theater, which was just a few blocks from his home.

It was a sad week when something prevented one of us kids from attending the Gem Theater and missed the next episode. But we could always make up for the loss by catching up at school on Monday. The Gem was not open on weekends during the summer of my days as a theater critic. The season at the Gem seemed to begin with school in the fall, and that was when the beloved serials started.

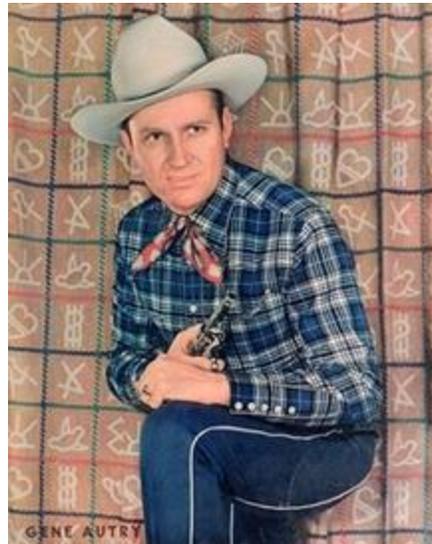
Using my Googler, I found that the entire Radio Days film is available as a YouTube movie that can be watched for free. After decades of abject frustration, I would finally be able to view the entire story at one time (the 1940 condensed version as opposed to the 1935 original). I watched it and recommended it to family and friends, who generally became convinced that I had lost my mind. I brought it up on my laptop one day to play for grandchildren. They looked at me as if “Grampa had finally lost it.” When I tried to explain why it was really so exciting, they nodded in a patronizing way, watched for few minutes, and then drifted away. They had important things to do like clip fingernails, or sort and fold athletic socks.

The plot surrounds the life of Gene Autry, who has contracted to produce a weekly radio show from his ranch (Melody Ranch), but finds that his signal is somehow being interfered with and not reaching the main studio. Perplexed by the threat of not being able to broadcast his weekly singing radio show, our hero begins to wonder about a group of odd easterners who have been seen near his ranch. Could these odd fellows who are riding horses while wearing business suits have anything to do with the problem? Naturally, our hero, Gene, follows the strange guys at a discreet distance on his wonder horse, Champion. The strangers ride along until they encounter an odd-looking bush. Then, looking left and right before they continue, they twist the bush and a giant plywood door opens up into the ground and they all disappear into it on their horses.

What else could Gene do? He rounds up several of “the boys,” returns to the phony bush, opens the secret door, and boldly rides into the underground chamber, where the bad guys had disappeared earlier. Once inside, Gene and his posse discover a massive elevator. And, of course, they push the elevator button, enter on horseback, and descend 3,500 feet to the center of the Earth. When the elevator door opens, they learn that the electrical interference that is preventing their radio signal from reaching the world is being created by an enormous underground city that happens to be just below Melody Ranch. That is where the posse with its six guns meets up with an advanced race of people wearing tin hats, holding ray guns, and having other amazing technologies. Knowing that you will want to watch every minute of this exciting drama, I will not spoil it by revealing the details or the ending.

"Phantom Empire" was such a success as a serialized adventure that it was edited and re-released in 1940 as a stand-alone film adventure. One day, now that I've seen "Radio Days" and been humiliated by grandchildren who have access to 12 bazillion channels of modern television on the 50-inch flat screen TVs that hang in their bedrooms, I am going to spring for the original 1935 Phantom Empire. When I watch the original serialized 12 parts, I will finally be "Back in the saddle again."

“Out where a friend is a friend,
Where the longhorn cattle feed,
On the lonesome jimson weed,
I'm back in the saddle again.”



Remember kids, always be straight shooters!

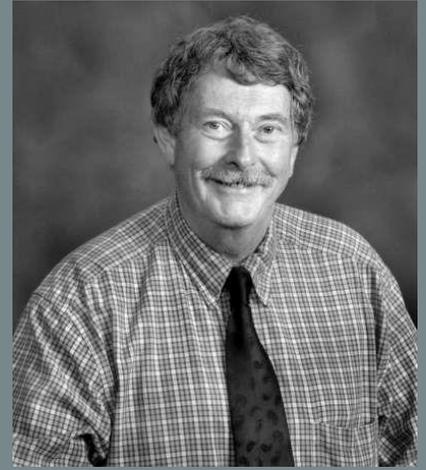
Photos:

Gene Autry Poster: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01439685.2013.847646?journalCode=chjf20>

Straight Shooters: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gene_Autry_Show

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is an emeritus professor at Gannon University, where he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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