

# The Apollo: Oberlin's chameleonic cinema

By Teresa Heinz  
Features Editor

College presidents, women's dormitories and disco night at the Sco have all come and gone, the manifestations of fickle whims and misguided intentions. Oberlinia does have its mainstays, however, one of which is The Apollo Theatre, at 19 E. College St.

Not surprisingly, this legendary venue has carved its own unique niche within Oberlin's historical past.

The theater is representative of both American pop culture and the pride involved in maintaining a small-town business. In an era when low attendance and economic difficulties have forced the closing of many small-town movie theaters nationwide, the Apollo has remained in successful operation, though not without undergoing significant changes.

## People always go to the movies

Sandy Steel, co-owner of the Apollo with his brother Bill, modestly credits most of the success to his audiences.

"Whatever the economic situation is, there always seems to be a desire of people to go to the movies. It is a form of escapism," said Sandy. "One of the things people always have money to do is to see movies."

The business gained from the College has also been a major factor in their operation. "We get comments that people are glad to see [this] theater still intact," said Bill. "There's not too many [small-town theaters] left." Theaters within other towns, including Wellington, Vermilion, and Amherst, have all closed, the victims of suburban multi-screen theater complexes.

## A family in film

The tradition of cinema management is deeply rooted in the Steel family. Sandy and Bill have, in a sense, spent their entire lives in the field because of their father's

**Founded in 1929 by Jerome Steele, the theater is representative of both American pop culture and the pride involved in maintaining a small-town business.**

involvement with the movie business. Prior to purchasing the Apollo in 1929, Jerome Steel worked as a distributor and salesperson for Universal Studios, and later, as a St. Louis district manager for Warner Bros.

Eventually, said Sandy, Jerome grew tired of selling movies and decided to open his own theater. He

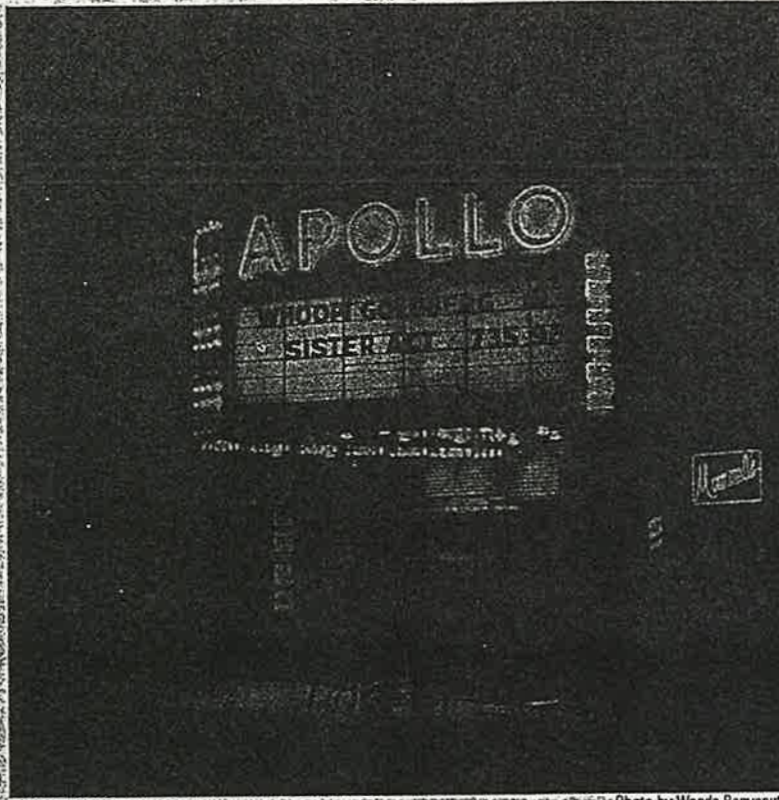


Photo by Wanda Benvenuti

The familiar Apollo marquee is only one of the theater's many decor innovations. Original features of this town institution include the ticket machine, exit signs and lights above the rest rooms.

bought the Apollo, which had functioned as a movie house since 1914, resolving to bring the comforts of more modern, urban theaters to Oberlin.

With that intention, Jerome opened the first modern "talkie" theater in Oberlin on May 11, 1929. He soon gained a faithful clientele, Oberlin residents having enjoyed the magic of film since early 1907; other silent theaters were located on South Main (in the Wynn building), East College Street (on the Martin building block), and above Gibson's Bakery. They soon folded after Jerome's "talkie" theater opened.

Technically, sound movies were not new to Oberlin at that time. Prior to Jerome's purchase, the Apollo functioned as a more primitive sound theater, with audio accompaniment provided by a victrol. Steel installed new, more advanced sound equipment and proclaimed an "All Talking Week" in November, 1929.

## Changing times and decor

During his ownership, the popular Steel patriarch sought to please his clientele with fashionable decor. The cumulative result of Jerome's many renovations is an intriguing hodge-podge of architectural fashion, reflecting numerous trends. In 1931, he increased the theater's capacity from 295 seats to 566 seats, and draped heavy velvet hangings on the walls.

An "Art Deco" style was introduced during a larger 1936 renovation; among new features were six pilasters of geometric design, coordinated carpeting, an improved air conditioning unit and a better sound system. The number of seats was again increased to 900. In the

early 1940s, the unusual black "carera" glass that covers the building's front porch and the Apollo's foyer was installed.

In addition, the original rectangular marquee was replaced after World War II with the signature neon sign that is still presently used. Among the oldest equipment pieces are the ticket machine, the lights above the rest rooms and the exit signs — all part of the building's original design.

Jerome constantly tried to make the Apollo an attractive alternative to television by providing quality films and inimitable atmosphere. The theater lost their audience of "mostly middle age and older people" during television's premier, said Sandy, while "picking up younger viewers" who sought more instant gratification. The Apollo showed news and cartoon features until television's golden age in the '40s.

## Growing up by flickering lights

The Steel brothers both fondly remember their childhood at the theater. The entire family was expected to help with day-to-day operations. Both sons were paid by their father to work in the theater, sell tickets and change the marquee. Bill eventually learned to operate the projector, which he still does today "in an emergency."

Growing up in a theater was not without its advantages. On their birthdays, each son was dedicated a free movie matinee to which the public was invited.

Sandy and Bill especially recall their father's efforts to cater to the interests of the College and the town. Remaining evidences of Jerome's dedication are the small, wooden

musical instruments carved into the entrance doors to the theaters. These were crafted by a former custodian, Bill Jones, to represent the College's musical tradition.

In many instances, Jerome incorporated the arts and live music at

**'On New Year's Eve, the ceiling was filled with balloons. We pulled a rope and released the balloons. We also had a Bank Night every week where we gave money away.'**

-Bill Steel

his theater. Two dressing rooms, which are now used as storage space, were built behind the screen to accommodate guest entertainers. A small stage hosted sundry bands, including "The Red Nickels and the Five Pennies," a group of local musicians who entertained guests during the late 1930s and early '40s.

Bill remembers prize giveaways, magicians, and holiday celebrations that attracted guests. "On New Year's Eve, the ceiling was filled with balloons. We pulled a rope and released the balloons," he recalls. "We also had a 'Bank Night' every week, where we gave money away." Customers won by ticket number. Occasionally when the prize money reached \$200, the prize was split between several winners.

Their most wistful memories, though, involve interactions between the theater and the College. "Years ago, the College had 'Freshman Week,'" remembers Bill. "[The students] had special hats that they had to wear. They used to come into the theater and run up one aisle and down the other aisle and then run out. It was a tradition ... that happened one night every year."

## From father to son

The Steel brothers would soon play an active part in the theater's unusual history. They assumed ownership in 1959, subsequent to their father's death.

Following the ownership transition, diminishing popular response to the American film industry affected the Apollo severely. Until then, the Apollo had primarily been a "second run" theater. (The benefit of "second run" theaters is that films that have already been recently shown in "first run" theaters can be rented for a lower ticket cost.)

However, the brothers decided to change this policy and present new foreign films once a week, beginning in the early '60s.

The foreign film industry was very good in those days," recalled Sandy, noting his dissatisfaction with formulaic "boy-meets-girl plots" of American movies.

Foreign films continued to be presented until about ten years ago, when the Apollo solely became "second run" once again. "Hollywood

producers started making better films. The foreign film supply deteriorated to a point where not many films were imported," Sandy said. "All foreign film theaters closed ... or turned into porno theaters."

The inexpensive ticket price has been the overriding incentive to keep the Apollo a "second run" theater, Sandy said, describing ticket prices as "excessive" in first-run theaters. "We've been able to stay successful because of the admission policy and our presentation of the films."

## A standard of excellence

The Steels still express their father's concern for the clientele. The theater is monitored for noise during presentations and their \$2 admission price on Tuesdays and Thursdays is popular with students. The new 17 by 35 ft. screen is the largest in the Oberlin/Wakeman area. Currently, the theater seats 840 people.

Running the Apollo continues to be a collaborative family effort. Sandy decides which movies will be presented by previewing them and charting their success in the New York and California markets. The theater's financial aspects are managed by Bill.

As for the future, the Steels have no immediate plans for major change. It is a subject that they broach hesitantly since none of their children, thus far, have expressed interest in taking over the theater.

With many small-town theaters "just plain closed down," admits Bill, the Apollo's existence is indeed remarkable, a symbol of endurance and family pride.