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Article Summary: Conservatives and members of the clergy fought to maintain a long-standing ban on Sunday amusements in Hastings in the early twentieth century. Eventually a coalition of business and professional people overthrew the ban in a highly-contested city election.

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Names: W A Waldron, Ernest Butzirus, P R Renner, R A Pickens, B P Richardson, James F Crowley, David B Marti, M H Garvin, William Nelson, Harry F Russell, J E Holley

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Photographs / Images: Wonderland Theater about 1916; Nickel Theater about 1910; inset ad for *The Birth of a Nation* (*Hastings Daily Tribune*, February 5, 1916); Rivoli Theater; Hastings City Council, October 7, 1927; Brach Theater (later renamed the Strand); interior of Strand Theater



The Wonderland Theater about 1916. Courtesy of Adams County Historical Society Archives, Hastings, Nebraska.

THE CONTROVERSY OVER SUNDAY MOVIES IN HASTINGS, 1913-1929

By Donald Schneider

In 1889 when Thomas A. Edison and Charles Eastman developed a framed, lined celluloid strip that could produce a motion picture, neither realized they were helping to launch a revolution in American morality and leisure activities. Edison saw it as a toy and ignored others' urgings to perfect the invention. Nevertheless, by 1892 "moving pictures" could be viewed at cheap

penny arcades and peep shows, because Edison had allowed some of his more eager associates to develop and distribute the product. In 1896 Edison produced a screen-projected motion picture that was shown at a music hall in New York City. After 1900 the nickelodeon theaters began to catch on and soon spread across the nation.¹ During the next sixteen years the basic ingredients of the modern movie were rapidly perfected by various film pioneers in the United States and Europe.² After the turn of

the century, movies that played to mass national audiences began to appear. Two of the first great silent picture classics were *The Great Train Robbery*, produced in 1903, and the controversial three-hour silent picture epic, *Birth of a Nation*, which appeared in March 1915.³ Increasingly popular movies triggered a movement for bigger and better movie houses from the mid-teens all the way through the twenties. The first talking movie, *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson, came out in 1927.⁴ By 1930 the silent movies were gone

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Sunday Movies in Hastings

and the talkies were pulling in ninety million viewers a week.⁵

Based on the experience in Hastings, Nebraska, it is evident that this new and evolving motion picture technology emanating from the urban cultural centers of the east and west coasts soon engrafted itself into the life of rural towns in the heartland. In the process motion pictures helped change the social and moral outlook of these towns. The impact of technical and societal change can be seen in the controversy over Sunday movies which occurred in Hastings from the mid-teens to the end of the twenties. For sixteen years the conservative elements within the town led by the clergy successfully resisted all efforts to change a fifty-year ban on any Sunday amusements. In the end, a new coalition of business and professional interests overthrew the old order during a highly contested city election in 1929.

The first moving pictures were shown in Hastings during a street fair in 1899.⁶ This was three years after Edison's first screen projection in New York. In 1907 the Nickel Theater was the first to show movies on a regular basis, although they were combined with vaudeville and other live productions. The first theater in Hastings devoted exclusively to the showing of moving pictures was the Brach Theater, opened in October 1916.⁷ New movies came to Hastings reasonably soon after release. *Birth of a Nation*, which premiered in New York City on March 3, 1915,⁸ came to Hastings just eleven months later on February 4, 1916.⁹

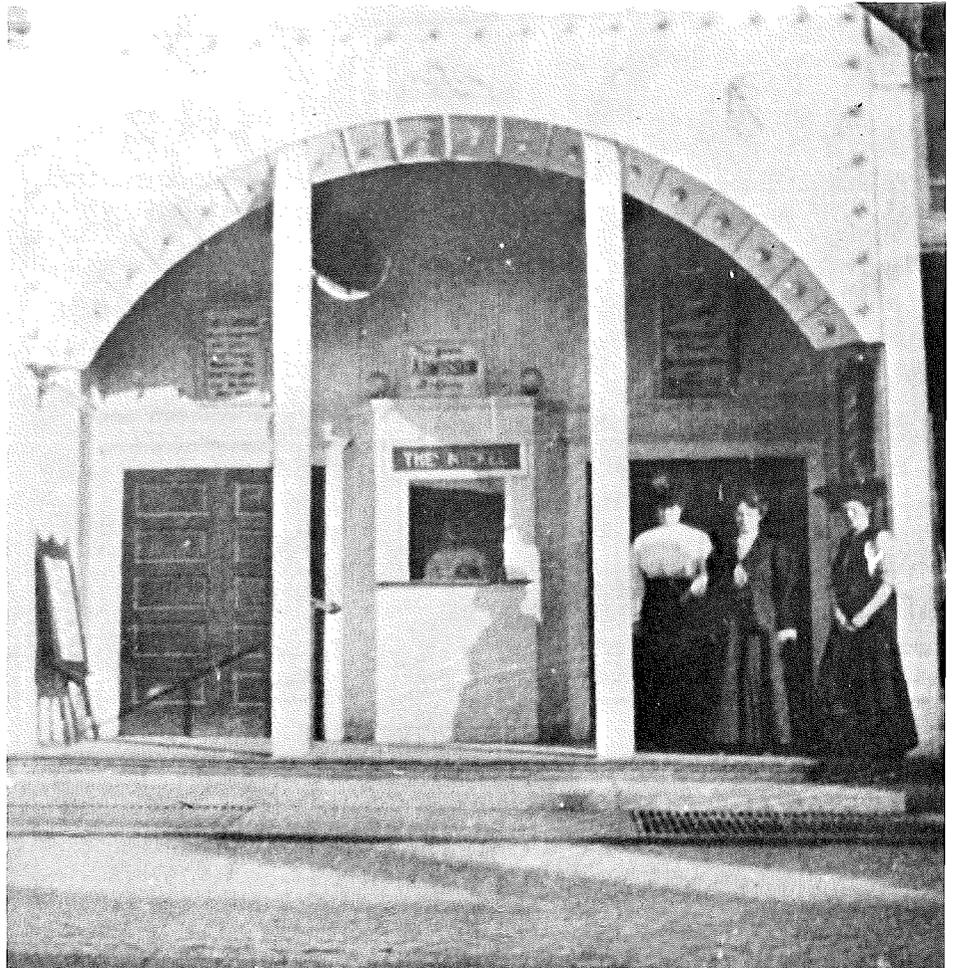
In the early teens controversy began to develop over attempts to show moving pictures on Sunday. The city's position was clearly stated in Ordinance XLVII, Sections 881 and 882, appearing in the 1892 *Municipal Code* and slightly revised by the city council in 1894.¹⁰ The ordinance forbade any person to run any show, play, opera, theater, or any other public amusement on Sunday except religious meetings where no

admission was charged.¹¹ On March 31, 1913, Reverend Robert A. Schell of the First Christian Church presented a request to the Hastings Ministerial Association on behalf of W.A. Waldron, proprietor of the Wonderland Theater, who proposed to show a benefit movie the following Sunday on behalf of the "Omaha sufferers," referring to the victims of a recent series of tornadoes, fires, and a flood in Omaha, Nebraska.¹² Waldron had sought the endorsement of the Ministerial Association, which expressed its appreciation for his benevolent purpose but advised him that "it wished to

put itself on record as unalterably opposed [to] the opening of the moving picture shows on Sunday."¹³

The position of the Ministerial Association was not simply that of opposing Sunday movies. It was part of a broad and fundamental commitment to the maintenance of a pure Sabbath. Earlier in 1913 the association had opposed allowing Sunday baseball in the city. On several occasions the group sought statewide action on Sunday observances by petitioning their state representatives and senator. It had asked the mayor to prevent construction, barbering, or land speculation on

The Nickel Theater about 1910. Courtesy of Adams County Historical Society Archives, Hastings, Nebraska.



Last Time Tonight!

For Hastings Citizens to Witness this
Wonderful Performance
The World's Greatest Spectacle

Tonight
At 8:15

Don't Miss Your
Last Chance
See
It
Now

Let's Go



Tonight
8:15

Millions Are
Talking About
It
100,000 Saw it
In Omaha
All Hastings is
Talking About it

Let's Go

Presented by Elliott and Sherman

Full Symphony Orchestra of ²⁰ Pieces

Prices 50c, 75c, \$1.00, \$1.50, and \$2.00.

Highly Important "Birth of a Nation" will never be presented in any but the higher class theatres at prices usually charged at such playhouses. — D. W. Griffith.

Hastings Daily Tribune, February 5, 1916.

Sundays; and in general the association opposed any activity that might suggest a more open Sunday. It even for a time discussed the propriety of holding funerals on Sunday.¹⁴

The Sunday movie issue surfaced again and again over the next sixteen years. The next time was in March 1914 when it was discovered that the pastor of the First Christian Church was showing movies at his Sunday evening service.¹⁵ He was showing church-oriented material, but the question of why it

could be all right for the churches to show films (but not all right for the theaters) had to be dealt with. Dr. Frank Weyer, long-time dean of Hastings College and retired when interviewed by the author in 1975, recalled that the minister of the First Christian Church had gone so far as to personally call one of the theater managers and say, in effect, "It's okay for us, but don't you try it!"¹⁶

The *Hastings Daily Republican* reported that movie operators were

trying to get regular Sunday movies because the churches were showing them and hinted that the matter might be taken to the city council.¹⁷ The ministers themselves were divided yet they wanted to present a united front. One newspaper reported that at an association meeting, Reverend Jonah Edwards of the West Nebraska Memorial Brethren had moved to condemn the practice of showing Sunday movies in any church and was seconded by Reverend J.E. Holley of the First Christian Church, but the motion was unanimously defeated.¹⁸ The Ministerial Association minutes merely noted that the association would not dictate to individual pastors and that it would not condemn *all* Sunday movies, but it would go "on record as greatly deprecating the tendency toward general desecration of the Sabbath in Hastings."¹⁹ In fact, more aggressive action was taken. The Reverend Mr. Holley contacted all three theater managers, who denied having spoken to the newspapers and disclaimed any desire to use the churches' showing of movies to get Sunday movies at their theaters.²⁰ On March 14 the Ministerial Association met again and appointed a committee of three to visit the mayor to make certain he would not allow the theaters to open on Sunday should they attempt it. This committee later reported that the mayor had reluctantly agreed to enforce the law. The ministers had already agreed to preach Sabbath desecration sermons on March 15 but added a motion to poll congregations regarding opposition to the proposed opening of the theaters and disapproval of tendencies toward an open Sabbath in Hastings.²¹ The March 15 poll was later reported as 2,660 against opening the theaters, none in favor.²²

Between 1914 and 1920 two more attempts were made to get Sunday picture shows in Hastings. On Saturday, August 25, 1917, a newspaper announced that the backers of a proposition to allow Sunday movies were circulating a petition which they

Sunday Movies in Hastings

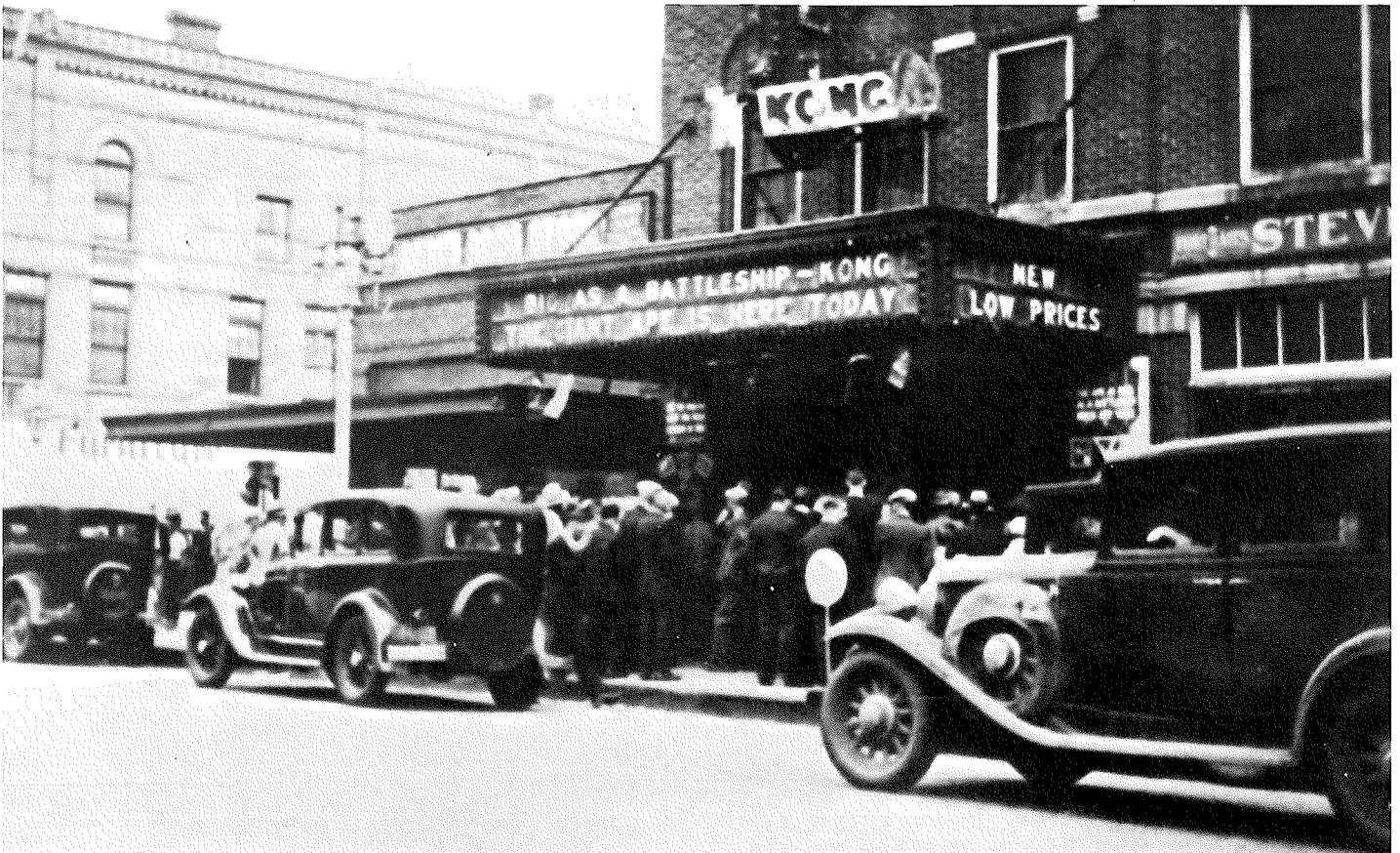
planned to present to the city council the following Monday. It also announced that the churches were circulating a counter-petition.²³ Ninety businesses had signed the petition asking for Sunday movies. At the council meeting attorney F.P. Olmstead argued that non-churchgoers needed a place to go on Sunday; that the old law banning Sunday amusements was outdated; that it had been ignored for county fairs and Chautauquas while enforced for movies; and that the city had outgrown the ordinance. Four ministers spoke for the churches against the petition, saying they recognized movies but opposed them on Sunday. The issue, they said, was whether Hastings was to be a wide-open town. Reverend C.E. Lemmon of the First Christian Church urged the council to "continue its stand for clean cut, definite things, the things which the city has stood for in the past."²⁴ The council action was immediate: A

motion to reject the Sunday movie petition was approved, six to two. Only councilmen Ernest Butzirus and P.R. Renner voted against rejection.²⁵ One more brief attempt came in 1918 when, as part of the war effort, it was suggested that movie houses be operated on Sunday afternoons for the benefit of the Red Cross. Unanimous opposition by the Ministerial Association quickly crushed the proposal.²⁶

Only with the coming of the 1920s would a sustained and serious effort to achieve Sunday movies occur. The first effort stretched from August 1920 through April 1921 and culminated in the first election concerning Sunday movies. Voters rejected Sunday movies in 1921, but the election pointed the way to their eventual acceptance in 1929. It was the movies themselves, expanding theaters, and changing public attitudes that spelled the difference in the outcome of the two elections.

In August 1920 Hastings lawyer R.A. Pickens began to circulate a petition asking the city council to permit the opening of theaters on Sunday. His only reason, he said, was that people were already going to other cities for Sunday amusements and he felt Hastings should compete.²⁷ Within two days Reverend B.P. Richardson of the First Baptist Church was circulating a counter-petition. Both men brought their petitions to the August 9 council meeting. Pickens said that although he wanted to see a referendum on the issue, he was not going to file the petition that night because he did not want to give the council the impression he was trying to push it through. It was more likely not presented because Pickens knew he would be defeated if he submitted the petition that night. Two days earlier Richardson had claimed five sure council votes against Pickens's petition, and he brought with him a counter-petition signed by 1,100

The Rivoli Theater. Courtesy of Adams County Historical Society Archives, Hastings, Nebraska.



Downtown Hastings, west from the intersection of Second Street and St. Joseph Avenue. Note the Rivoli Theater marquee advertising vaudeville acts. (A216-01K1)





RIVOLI

VAUDEVILLE
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persons. Since the Pickens petition was not filed, Richardson did not file his.²⁸

On August 23, 1920, Pickens again appeared at a council meeting. This may have been unexpected because no ministers were mentioned as being present. Instead of submitting his petition he asked the council to put the Sunday movie question to a vote of the people and to abide by the majority vote. Councilmen James F. Frye, William Harm, Aldrich D. Lay, Walter Livingston, P.R. Renner, and Oliver C. Zinn agreed to the request and signed a statement which said in part:

Desiring to know the preference of the people of our city on the subject of Sunday theatres we agree to submit the question to a vote and to abide by the vote and preference as shown by the total preference vote.²⁹

Councilmen Harry E. Bowman and Mulford M. Haynes refused to sign. Pickens did not press for an immediate election, and no further action was taken.³⁰ Because this was all done during informal discussion, there is no mention of it in the August 23, 1920, council minutes.³¹ Two months passed. Then on October 25, 1920, two other lawyers, J.H. Lohman and James F. Crowley, appeared before the city council to ask that a special election be held. They presented a \$1,500 bond to cover the cost of the election, stipulating that it be held within forty-five days.³² It is again likely that the appearance was unannounced, because the newspapers make no mention of ministers present to protest. The councilmen declined to take action, saying they would meet again to discuss it. There is no mention of the bond or Sunday movies in the council minutes, which note only that the council would recess until November 3, 1920, "to take up and consider such matters as may properly come before the body."³³

An entirely different tone was set at the special council meeting held on November 3. James Crowley spoke in favor of the request for a special election, but the chamber was packed with opponents from the Ministerial

Association and the Men's Inter-Church Reserve, an inter-denominational men's service organization. Besides arguing against Sunday movies *per se*, one of the representatives of the Inter-Church Reserve also argued against the legality of such an election. This was David B. Marti of the Marti-Matter Company, a local real estate, loan, and insurance firm. Marti pointed out to the councilmen that such an election would be illegal because Hastings did not have the referendum. That point was argued. The mayor said he personally opposed Sunday movies but conceded an election would be legal, while the city attorney argued that it would not be legal. The council was badly divided, with only Councilman P.R. Renner willing to say that he would favor a special election. Thus no action was taken.³⁴ The only item in the November 3, 1920, council minutes, besides the call to order, roll call, and adjournment, is the statement:

The matter of Sunday Picture Shows and theatres taken up and considered at length in a general discussion participated in by councilmen and citizens.³⁵

Four months passed without further action. Then on March 14, 1921, James Crowley again appeared before the city council. He presented a petition signed by 600 persons, which the newspaper said included ninety percent of the businesses in town. The council minutes referred to it as "a petition signed some time previous."³⁶ The petition requested the council to amend the city ordinance to permit Sunday movies; but what Crowley actually asked for was that the council put the issue on the upcoming April city ballot. During the discussion that followed, City Clerk A.T. Bratten said that had he been notified thirty days prior to the election, he could have placed the question on the regular ballot, but it would be impossible now. After the council adjourned there was further discussion during which someone suggested that perhaps the movie issue could be put on a separate ballot

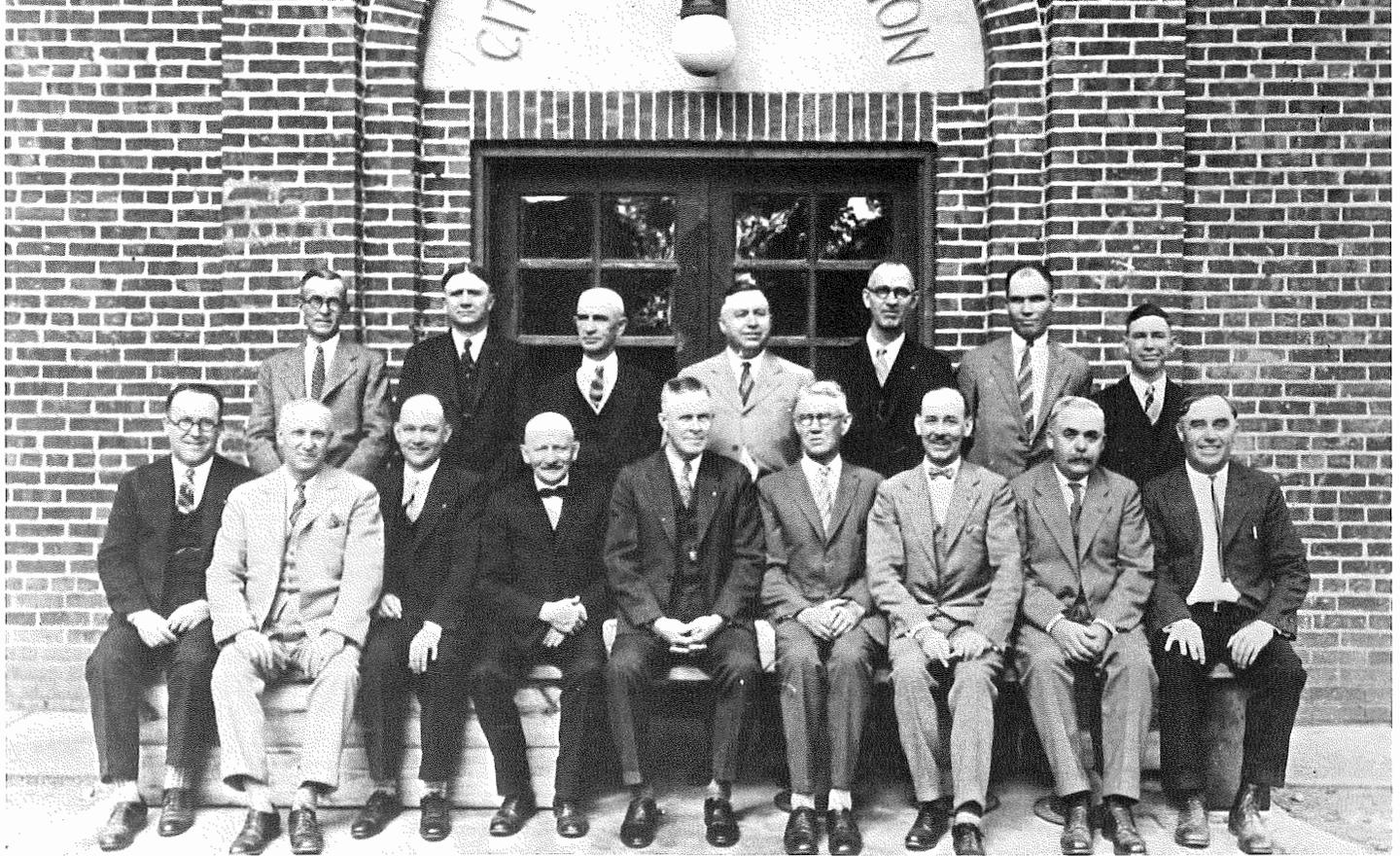
by the same method as candidates were nominated by petition. Bratten refused to rule on the procedure's legality but stated that such a method had been used once before on a Sunday baseball issue.³⁷ A new opportunity was suddenly available, and James Crowley was quick to seize it. Within three days he was circulating a petition.

The issue would be:

- Yes _____ Shall the Mayor and Council of the City of Hastings, Adams County, Nebraska, amend and pass the necessary ordinances to permit the operation of motion picture shows and theaters on Sunday, the same as on any other day of the week?³⁸
- No _____

Two hundred signatures were required for a nomination petition and Crowley had 225 signatures when he filed his petition on March 24.³⁹ A newspaper account reported that the petition would be presented to the council for approval at its March 28 meeting. No mention was made of the petition in either the March 28, 1921, council minutes or in the newspapers. Apparently no council action was needed to place the question on the ballot, since it was to be a non-binding expression of public sentiment.⁴⁰

The city elections were scheduled for April 5, 1921, and a furious campaign was waged. On March 22 the issue was debated at an Inter-Church Reserve meeting ostensibly devoted to a debate among the three candidates for mayor. On Saturday, March 26, a slightly larger than half-page advertisement attacking the proposal appeared in the *Hastings Daily Tribune*. Five one-inch advertisements saying "Vote FOR Sunday Shows, Tuesday, April 5" appeared on the same page. The half-page advertisement argued that it was not only a moral issue but a practical one. There were already forty-eight movie showings per week in Hastings theaters which were owned by outside interests, siphoning money out of town. On a more frenzied level the half-page anti-Sunday-movie advertisement said that a vote for Sunday movies was a vote against churches, education, the college, businesses, and the laboring



Hastings City Council, October 7, 1927. Several of those pictured played a role in the Sunday movie controversy. Back row: P.R. Renner (third from left), R.M. Van Gilder (fourth from left), Walter Stewart (fifth from left). Front row: G.H. Hunt (left), R.I. Van Patter (second from left), Mayor William Nelson (fifth from left), Harry E. Bowman (sixth from left), Ernest Butzirus (eighth from left), William Harm (ninth from left). Courtesy of Adams County Historical Society Archives, Hastings, Nebraska.

man. It further argued that, due to its fine moral atmosphere, Hastings was a “beautiful city,” and that a vote for Sunday movies would destroy that beauty. It concluded in part:

BEWARE. This move for an open Sunday is the opening wedge for a far larger movement which will, if successful, lead to a Sunday of unbridled license. Sinister interests, nation-wide, are seeking to break down the Christian Sabbath.⁴¹

It is unclear what person(s) or organization(s) paid for this and similar “Vote NO” advertisements that appeared during the campaign. The half-page advertisement had been paid for “by small contributions from hundreds of concerned citizens.” By the end of the campaign, however, a Men’s Inter-Church Federation had been identified as having a campaign headquarters at the Marti-Miller Company real estate office and was reported to have had a representative in every block in the city to check registration and encourage voters.⁴² This was probably an *ad hoc* organization led by the Men’s Inter-Church Reserve and may well have been the organization behind the advertisements.

An underlying intolerance on the part of the anti-Sunday-movie forces

was evident at a large anti-Sunday-movie rally held at the Kerr Opera House on April 1, 1921. Reverend C.E. Lemmon of the First Christian Church made a speech in which he compared Hastings with Grand Island. He argued that Hastings was a good town while Grand Island was a bad town; that everything good about Hastings resulted from the closed Sunday; and that everything bad about Grand Island resulted from an open Sunday. The most intolerant remarks were made by Reverend G.E. Newell of the First Presbyterian Church, who argued that

a group of Jews of the motion picture industry, the international sports club of New York, and allied with those groups of infidels, and aliens who are bent on introducing the continental Sunday in America, compose the forces promoting open Sunday.⁴³

The pro-Sunday-movie forces were apparently less organized and not as well financed. They conducted no public rallies and managed only one large newspaper advertisement — a half-page ad that appeared in the April 4, 1921, *Hastings Daily Tribune*. However, this advertisement was matched by a same size “Vote NO”

advertisement on the opposite page. The “Vote YES” ad sidestepped the outside ownership issue by saying other businesses had outside ownership. It stated, “Statistics show that more than half the people do not affiliate with any church,” thus arguing that it was unfair for a minority to dictate to the majority. The advertisement further argued that the ban on Sunday movies was unfair to farmers and those who worked six days a week. The advertisement also asserted that movies were all right for children to attend. No mention was made of the Sabbath observance as an issue *per se*, but half the advertisement consisted of a series of favorable quotations from towns that had adopted Sunday movies and were happy about it.⁴⁴

Heavy voter registration had been reported on April 4, and the early returns reported April 5 indicated a “very heavy” turnout.⁴⁵ In fact 4,450 votes were cast in the April 5, 1921 municipal election. This compares with 2,945 in 1919; 1,825 in 1920; and 2,600 in 1922.⁴⁶ Some of this increase was due to women voting for the first time, but the fact that the vote sharply declined in

the 1922 election indicates that the Sunday movie issue stimulated voter participation. There were no special issues in 1919, 1920, or 1922, while the Sunday movie proposal was the only special issue on the 1921 ballot.⁴⁷

The election resulted in an overwhelming defeat for Sunday movies: 1,533 (thirty-six percent) voted yes; 2,676 (sixty-four percent) voted no. The pro-Sunday movie forces had been able to carry only one precinct out of seven, and that one by a mere six votes.⁴⁸ Because the defeat was so overwhelming it was several years before the Sunday movie issue resurfaced. By then the situation with regard to motion pictures in Hastings had changed dramatically.

In April 1917 the Wonderland was remodeled to expand its capacity. In May 1921 the Lyric was expanded and given greater seating capacity. In June 1921 the Strand Theater spent \$10,000 to install a new organ. In August 1924 remodeling of the Empress and Palm theaters enabled the Palm to show motion pictures exclusively. In 1926 the Hostettler Amusement Company, which owned the Kerr and Palm theaters, bid a high \$26,000 for three lots at the Second and Burlington downtown business area, while in the same year construction proceeded on a brand new theater called the Rivoli.⁴⁹ By the time the Rivoli opened in March 1927, its total cost, including furnishings and equipment, was approximately \$325,000.⁵⁰ By 1929 the movies were no longer a struggling part-time operation of the local vaudeville houses. Instead, they were an established, expanding enterprise that made substantial capital investments in building and equipment in local communities. Their future was boosted by the distribution of the first talking motion picture, *The Jazz Singer*, in October 1927.⁵¹ In Hastings the era of the talking picture was destined to coincide with the era of the Sunday movie.

The shadow of defeat was long from the 1921 debacle, although a minor

effort was made in 1927 when M.H. Garvin, manager of the Rivoli Theater, tried to show a Sunday movie as a benefit for Mississippi River flood victims in several southern states. The National Red Cross and the motion picture industry had set aside Sunday, May 8, 1927, to raise money through the sponsoring of motion picture shows.⁵² This proposal was similar to what had been tried in 1913 — and it met a similar fate. The Ministerial Association immediately condemned the venture⁵³ and was even joined by the local Red Cross. After conferring with a few “representative citizens,” Mayor William Nelson rejected the request, stating it was “unwise . . . on account of not having Sunday shows at other times.” M.H. Garvin argued that he had offered his theater and staff for free; that the benefit would have brought in about \$1,000; and that it was not an attempt to get regular Sunday movies. The mayor refused to budge, however, and the issue died.⁵⁴

In 1929 a systematic attempt was once again initiated to gain approval for Sunday movies in Hastings. M.H. Garvin was still the Rivoli Theater manager and William Nelson was still the mayor, but the outcome was entirely different. This time the conservative forces were unable to stem the demand for change. Sunday piety was defeated by Sunday amusements. Unlike the drawn-out affair of 1920-21, the 1929 controversy lasted about one month from start to finish.

On Monday, January 14, 1929, M.H. Garvin appeared before the Hastings City Council to ask that a special election for Sunday movies be held prior to the April 2, 1929, municipal election. He stated that the interests he represented would pay for the cost of the election. After discussion, the council voted six to one to approve the special election. Only Harry E. Bowman voted no. Voting in favor were William Harm, G.H. Hunt, R.H. Kerr, P.R. Renner, Walter Stewart, and R.M. Van Gilder, with R.I. Van Patten absent.⁵⁵ Councilmen Harm and Hunt were to work

out the details for the election. The next day word of the special election appeared on page six of the *Hastings Daily Tribune*.⁵⁶

On Wednesday, January 16, the *Hastings Daily Tribune* ran a full-column editorial endorsing the idea of an election on Sunday movies. “Times have changed,” the editorial began, and argued that the issue was not really whether people would be able to see Sunday movies, but rather where they would see them, since many already did so by driving to other towns. “That is the condition to which the drift of the times has brought us.”⁵⁷ Times hadn’t changed completely, however, because on Sunday the Men’s Inter-Church Reserve formally acted to oppose Sunday movies, and on Monday the Ministerial Association did the same.⁵⁸ The Ministerial Association quickly raised \$500 for the campaign by assessing the member churches sums ranging from \$20 to \$145. An executive committee was also formed to direct the effort.⁵⁹ Heading the committee was Harry F. Russell. Other members were Dr. C.B. Hankins of the First Methodist; Lee Haggard, president of the Men’s Inter-Church Reserve; and Reverend Harold Fey for the First Christian Church.⁶⁰ Russell was vice president of a trust and investment company, which also employed the mayor as secretary.⁶¹ By Thursday, January 24, Councilmen Harm and Hunt had announced that Friday, February 8, would be the date of the election. On the same day M.H. Garvin announced that the backers of Sunday movies would wage no campaign nor conduct any mass meetings. The next day the *Hastings Daily Tribune* came out with its second editorial comment sympathetic to Sunday movies and critical of opponents.⁶²

On Sunday, January 27, 1929, over 4,000 anti-Sunday-movie handbills were passed out to various church congregations, while several pastors preached anti-Sunday-movie sermons.⁶³ On Monday the Ministerial Association made plans for a house-to-

Sunday Movies in Hastings

house canvass,⁶⁴ and the city council formally accepted February 8, 1929, as the date of the election.⁶⁵ It was also on Monday that plans were first announced for a mass protest meeting to be held the following Sunday night at the City Auditorium. Sponsors of the protest were the Ministerial Association, Men's Inter-Church Reserve, Women's Christian Temperance Union, YMCA, YWCA, Salvation Army, and Hastings College. The rest of the week was fairly quiet. Two letters to the editor favored Sunday movies, while two were opposed. The first campaign advertisement appeared, this one favoring Sunday movies, and one of the ministers recruited forty Hastings College students to help the campaign.⁶⁶

Saturday's paper of February 2, 1929, prepared readers for the last week of the campaign. For the third time an editorial discussed the election. This time support for Sunday movies was clearly expressed, although citizens were not actually advised to vote "yes." There also appeared both a large advertisement (paid for by M.H. Garvin) attacking the opponents of Sunday movies and a half-page advertisement (paid for by the "Better Hastings Committee") protesting Sunday movies and calling for proper Sabbath observance. The "pro" and "anti" advertisements were repeated for the rest of the week. Four of each appeared in the *Hastings Daily Tribune*, while the weekly *Hastings Democrat* ran gratis a full-page advertisement defending Sunday movies. Eight letters to the editor appeared in the *Hastings Daily Tribune* favoring Sunday movies, while none were printed protesting them.⁶⁷

The advertisements, the speeches, and the letters all expressed the same basic arguments. The proponents called for a new order of things based upon a realistic acceptance of present conditions. The opposition called for rigid adherence to old ways that had served the town through fifty years of growth. One of the main arguments M.H. Garvin used the night he pre-

sented his request to the council was that Sunday movies were already available to those who could drive to one of the ten towns within a sixty-mile radius that had them.⁶⁸ One Hastings resident later recalled that many families of only modest means often made the trip to Grand Island for the Sunday afternoon movies.⁶⁹ This argument was echoed in a *Hastings Daily Tribune* editorial two days later. The editorial rejected the charge that Sunday movies would corrupt the youth, arguing that the young could already see movies on six other days and that family guidance would still be present. In a letter to the *Hastings Daily Tribune*, a resident of Blue Hill, a small town twenty miles south of Hastings, reported that his town had approved Sunday movies two years earlier and suffered no ill effects. It was a blessing, the letter continued, because now parents knew where their children were. Several letters chastised the churches for interfering. The *Hastings Daily Tribune* editorially charged that the churches were wrong to believe that their position would be threatened by Sunday movies. M.H. Garvin directly attacked the anti-Sunday-movie forces, who had formally organized to oppose the election, through an advertisement in which he argued that "organized interests" had opposed almost all progressive measures ever proposed in Hastings.⁷⁰

The Sunday movie opponents advanced three major arguments. The first two predictably stated that the Sabbath observance was sacred and that an "open Sunday" would ruin the town. The third charge was that Sunday movies were the money-making scheme of a few businesses, particularly one business "owned by outside interests," a reference to M.H. Garvin's company.⁷¹

The very wording of the election resolution was a subtle attack on the "Sabbath Day" argument:

Shall the opening and operation of moving picture shows and theaters on the first day of the week, commonly called Sunday, be authorized in the City of Hastings.⁷²

At least one advertisement directly attacked the Sabbath argument by saying that Sunday was not the true Sabbath and that Christ himself had violated the original Sabbath.⁷³ Garvin countered the "outside interests" charge by pointing out that his theater was a local business since he was one-fourth owner; it employed twenty-four persons; and paid \$24,752 per year in salaries and \$5,000 in taxes.⁷⁴ The argument that Sunday movies would ruin the town and cause delinquency was rebutted in an editorial in the *Hastings Democrat*:

(Sunday movies) are the result of a changed order of things not the forerunner of evil. If they have any appreciable effect upon church activities it will be to spur the church to more earnest work The plea that prohibition of Sunday movies is necessary in order to protect the young folk is merely a plea of confession and avoidance; a shifting of parental responsibility that reflects no credit upon the parents who advance it Are not the ministers and churchmen confessing their own failure? . . . We resent the charge that we are endeavoring to break down the morals of our citizens, to destroy the work of the churches and hamper the splendid work of Hastings College.⁷⁵

The preceding paragraphs suggest that the temper of the times had changed, that the foes of Sunday movies seemed to be losing ground and were offering arguments that seemed hollow to a citizenry now a decade removed from World War I. Further evidence of change was offered by the big anti-movie protest meeting held the Sunday before the election, February 3, 1929, at the Hastings City Auditorium. It should have been the high point of the campaign and no doubt it appeared so to the participants who packed the auditorium. Dr. C.W. Weyer, former pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, had returned from Tacoma, Washington, to deliver the keynote address. In his speech he acknowledged that Hastings was the only one of thirteen nearby towns not having Sunday movies but said that Hastings had a unique moral reputation known throughout the nation. He further asserted that if Sunday movies were allowed, within ten years there would be a separate vice district in Hastings



The Brach Theater, later renamed the Strand. Courtesy of Adams County Historical Society Archives, Hastings, Nebraska.

and that Hastings College would have been driven out of town.⁷⁶

Dr. Weyer's speech backfired. Both newspapers editorially condemned the speech and the speaker. The *Hastings Daily Tribune* called him an extremist and asserted, "Surely such a speech was made with reckless disregard of the facts of the situation. The speaker could not have believed his own statement." The *Hastings Democrat* stated that it "resented and protested" Weyer's prediction that movies would create a vice district and described these remarks as "an insult to the intelligence." Both editorials appeared the day before the election. On the same day a story appeared in the *Hastings Daily Tribune* announcing that the new sound system at the Rivoli was nearing completion and that the first talking motion picture would be shown on February 18.⁷⁷ How could voters resist?

As it turned out they couldn't. The February 8, 1929, special election registered approval of Sunday movies by a margin of fifty-three percent or 289

votes. All four wards approved Sunday movies, although the proposal was defeated in three precincts by a total of twenty-nine votes and in one precinct by a margin of fifty-seven percent. Another precinct in the same ward gave the highest margin of approval, sixty-four percent. A total of 4,795 votes were cast. By comparison 5,071 voted for councilmen in 1928; 3,564 cast votes for mayor in the regular election in April 1929; and only 1,131 cast votes for councilmen in 1930.⁷⁸

The city council met on February 11, 1929, to certify the election and by a six-to-two vote approved an amendment to the city ordinances making Sunday movies legal.⁷⁹ The fight was over, although Mayor Nelson, who had always opposed Sunday movies, held out for the full ten days allowed before signing the ordinance on February 21, 1929. This was three days after the first talking picture was shown in Hastings. On March 3, 1929, a movie was shown at a public theater on Sunday for the first time in the history of Hastings. The newspapers reported that all four

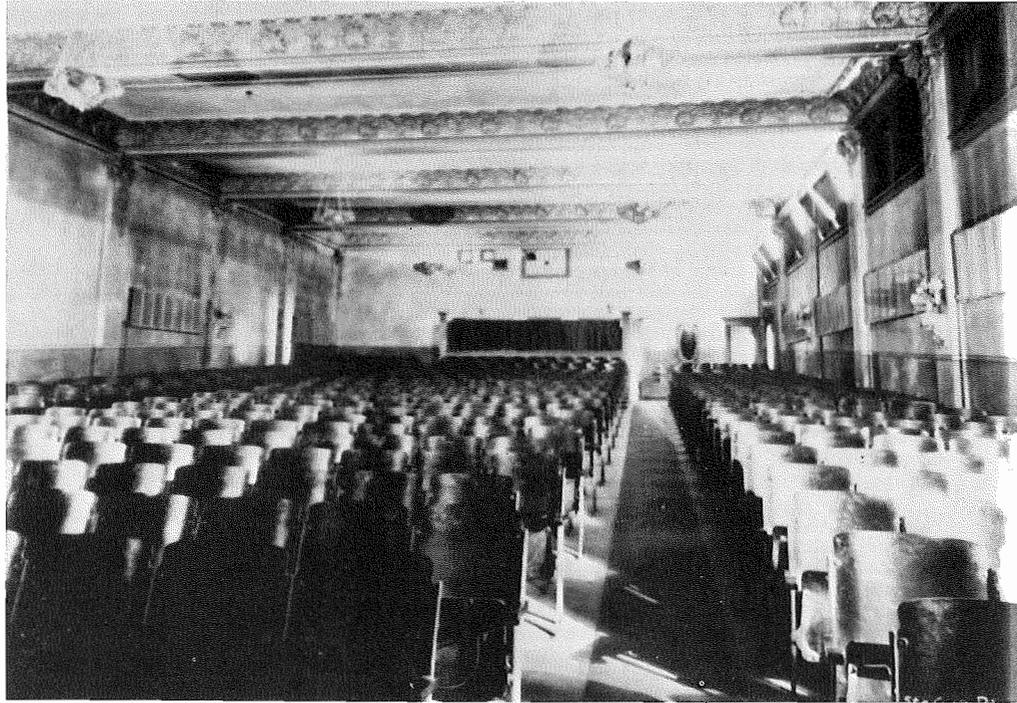
showings were extremely well attended, with cars parked on both sides of the street for several blocks. Both newspapers noted a concentration of out-of-town cars, especially from Hall County.⁸⁰ The only further action by the Ministerial Association was to thank Harry F. Russell for his efforts as chairman of the joint committee.⁸¹ No other comment is recorded in the association minutes or in the newspapers. Sunday movies soon became so commonplace that a girl from out-of-town who enrolled at Hastings College in the fall of 1929 was unaware that there had ever been a controversy over them. She later related that during her four years at the college she routinely went to Sunday movies. This was at a time when Hastings College students were strictly prohibited from attending dances, and smoking was prohibited on the campus itself.⁸²

It is also interesting to note what happened to men who took a stand on the Sunday movie issue, because it illustrates the changing values of the

Sunday Movies in Hastings

town. Mayor Nelson did not run for re-election. However, all six councilmen who voted in favor of Sunday movies in 1929 successfully sought another term in 1929 or 1930.⁸³ The two men who voted against allowing Sunday movies, R.I. Van Patten and Harry E. Bowman, both lost in the 1929 election. Van Patten's second ward had approved Sunday movies 760 to 728 in the special election. He was defeated 592 to 421 in the general election.⁸⁴ The man who beat him, Ernest Butziris, was the only man besides P.R. Renner to support Sunday movies when the council first voted on the issue in 1917.⁸⁵ When Mayor Nelson announced his intention not to seek re-election, Harry Bowman dropped out of the council race to file for mayor. His opponent, J.M. Davis, had previously filed to oppose Nelson and easily beat Bowman by better than two to one.⁸⁶ William Harm, who along with Hunt spearheaded the 1929 council action in approving Sunday movies, was eventually elected mayor of Hastings in 1935 and in 1941.⁸⁷

During the 1920s such developments as the automobile, radio, electric appliances, new forms of entertainment, and Prohibition all had a significant impact on American attitudes and values. The issue of Sunday movies fits within that context. Not only were movies a particularly appealing form of entertainment, but people had more leisure time to attend them. Don S. Kirschner, in his book, *City and Country*, argued that by the end of World War I many Americans, even those in rural areas or small towns, had begun to retreat from ideals and participate in the "new materialism." He said the clergy's original opposition to movies alleging licentiousness and immorality shifted to a simple request that they not be allowed on Sunday.⁸⁸ By opposing Sunday movies "the churches made themselves appear more worried about competition than corruption," according to Kirschner.⁸⁹ Certainly the situation in Hastings seems to fit this analysis. By the end of the twenties the churchmen were not able to prevent



Interior of Strand Theater. Substantial investments in interior furnishings were made as movies ceased to be a struggling part-time operation of local vaudeville houses. Courtesy of Adams County Historical Society Archives, Hastings, Nebraska.

Sunday movies even in as conservative a town as Hastings with its Presbyterian college and large Methodist and Presbyterian congregations. The business community saw the issue primarily in economic terms: People will attend movies on Sunday, so why not in Hastings?

Frederick Lewis Allen in *Only Yesterday* characterized the 1920s as a decade of "revolution in morals and manners." He contended that ministers often failed in their attempts to prescribe moral standards and in many cases, lost sight of their own purpose.⁹⁰ The approval of Sunday movies in Hastings suggests that by 1929 a majority no longer accepted the views and authority of the churchmen when it came to defining community-wide standards of conduct and morality.

NOTES

¹Arthur Mayer and Richard Griffith, *The Movies* (New York, 1957), 1-6.

²Mayer and Griffith, *Movies*, 6-44.

³Joe Franklin, *Classics of the Silent Screen* (New York, 1959), 11, 16-19.

⁴Mayer and Griffith, *Movies*, 121, 241.

⁵*This Fabulous Century, 1920-1930*, vol. 3, Time-Life Books (New York, 1969), 25.

⁶William R. Burton and David J. Lewis, *Past and Present of Adams County Nebraska* (Chicago, 1916), 105.

⁷Burton and Lewis, *Adams County*, 105. The Brach Theater was renamed the Strand Theater sometime before June 1921. The complete history of this landmark Hastings building and the history of the movie theaters in it is told in Don Mathews, "Strand Theatre," *Historical News, Adams County Historical Society*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1987): 1-5. When the Brach opened in 1916 1,400 persons attended the grand opening. A new type of screen and a new projector were featured. *Hastings Daily Tribune*, October 3, 1916.

⁸Mayer and Griffith, *Movies*, 36.

⁹*Hastings Daily Tribune*, February 5, 1916. *Birth of a Nation* was also protested a year later. *Hastings Daily Tribune*, January 6, 1917, and February 23, 1917.

¹⁰*Municipal Code of the City of Hastings, Nebraska, 1892, Revised*, City Records, City Clerk's Office, Hastings, Nebraska, 261-62; *Record, City of Hastings, Nebraska*, City Records, City Clerk's Office, Hastings, Nebraska, May 7, 1894.

¹¹*Municipal Code 1892, 261-62; Hastings Daily Republican*, March 9, 1914. This ordinance is completely omitted from the next City Code. *Municipal Code of the City of Hastings, Nebraska, 1937, Revised*, City Records, City Clerk's Office, Hastings, Nebraska. Hastings was hardly unique in banning Sunday movies or other forms of Sunday entertainment in a time when blue laws were the norm. For example, the fact that Fremont, Nebraska, prohibited Sunday picture shows was one of the reasons listed by a 1919 search committee of a Lutheran college in Atchison, Kansas, for moving the college to Fremont, where it became Midland College. Lillian Willert Hickman, "The History of Midland College" (Master's Thesis, University of Oregon, June 1949, Midlandiana Collection, Luther Library, Midland Lutheran College, Fremont, Nebraska), 154.

¹²*Minutes, Hastings Ministerial Association* (Archives, Adams County Historical Society, Hastings, Nebraska), March 31, 1913. The *Hastings Daily Tribune*, beginning March 24, 1913, described a series of disasters that hit Omaha, beginning with tornadoes on March 23, then fire, followed by a crippling snowstorm. About 300 were killed and over 1,000 injured. A statewide appeal for aid was issued March 27, and the Hastings Chamber of Commerce began collecting funds the next day.

¹³*Ministerial Association*, March 31, 1913.

¹⁴*Ministerial Association*, March 26, 1913; April 4, 1913; March 9, 1914; February 14, 1917; February 7, 1921; June 2, 1913; October 5, 1914; June 4, 1918; October 10, 1913; December 4, 1916; September 6, 1920; October 18, 1926; September 17, 1928; December 10, 1923; January 14, 1924; February 4, 1924.

¹⁵*Hastings Daily Tribune*, March 10, 1914.

¹⁶Dr. Frank Weyer, interview with author, Hastings, Nebraska, January 26, 1975.

¹⁷*Hastings Daily Republican*, March 9, 1914.

¹⁸*Hastings Daily Tribune*, March 10, 1914.

¹⁹*Ministerial Association*, March 9, 1914.

²⁰Rev. J.E. Holley, letter to "Peoples Forum," *Hastings Daily Republican*, March 11, 1914.

²¹*Ministerial Association*, March 14, 1914; March 16, 1914.

²²*Hastings Daily Republican*, March 16, 1914; *Ministerial Association*, March 16, 1914.

²³*Hastings Daily Tribune*, August 25, 1917; *Ministerial Association*, August 24, 1917. The ministerial association minutes resolved that the mayor be contacted personally to insure his opposition.

²⁴*Hastings Daily Tribune*, August 28, 1917.

²⁵*Record, Hastings, Nebraska*, August 27, 1917.

²⁶*Ministerial Association*, September 2, 1918.

²⁷*Hastings Daily Tribune*, August 5, 1920.

²⁸*Ibid.*, August 7, 10, 1920.

²⁹*Record, Hastings, Nebraska*, August 9, 1920.

³⁰*Hastings Daily Tribune*, August 24, 1920.

³¹*Record, Hastings, Nebraska*, August 27, 1917.

³²*Hastings Daily Tribune*, October 26, 1920.

³³*Record, Hastings, Nebraska*, October 25, 1920.

³⁴*Hastings Daily Tribune*, November 4, 1920.

³⁵*Record, Hastings, Nebraska*, November 3, 1920.

³⁶*Record, Hastings, Nebraska*, March 14, 1921. This would indicate that it was probably the petition originally circulated by R.A. Pickens in August 1920.

³⁷*Hastings Daily Tribune*, March 15, 1921; March 24, 1921.

³⁸*Ibid.*, March 18, 1921, for a story on Crowley's effort; April 4, 1921 for the City Clerk's official notice of the nomination.

³⁹*Hastings Daily Tribune*, March 24, 1921.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, March 29, 1921; *Record, Hastings, Nebraska*, March 28, 1921.

⁴¹*Hastings Daily Tribune*, March 23, 1921; March 26, 1921.

⁴²*Ibid.*, April 5, 1921.

⁴³*Ibid.*, April 2, 1921.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, April 4, 1921.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, April 5, 1921.

⁴⁶*Record, Hastings, Nebraska*, April 11, 1921; April 7, 1919; April 12, 1920; April 10, 1922.

⁴⁷*Hastings Daily Tribune*, April 4, 1921. *Record, Hastings, Nebraska*, April 11, 1921; April 7, 1919; April 12, 1920; April 10, 1922.

⁴⁸*Record, Hastings, Nebraska*, April 11, 1921.

⁴⁹*Hastings Daily Tribune*, April 30, 1917; May 29, 1921; June 25, 1921; August 28, 1924; March 18, 1926; October 28, 1926. Mathews, *Strand Theatre*, 4.

⁵⁰*Hastings Democrat*, March 31, 1927.

⁵¹Mayer and Griffith, *Movies*, 241.

⁵²*Hastings Daily Tribune*, May 4, 1927; *Hastings Democrat*, May 5, 1927.

⁵³*Ministerial Association*, May 2, 1927.

⁵⁴*Hastings Daily Tribune*, January 15, 1929.

⁵⁵*Record, Hastings, Nebraska*, January 14, 1929. See notes 85-89 and accompanying text for later political fortunes of the mayor and these eight councilmen.

⁵⁶*Hastings Daily Tribune*, January 15, 1929.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, January 16, 1929.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, January 21, 1929.

⁵⁹*Ministerial Association*, January 21, 1929.

⁶⁰*Hastings Daily Tribune*, January 24, 1929.

⁶¹*Hastings City Directory, 1930* (Kansas City, 1930), 111. The business was Clarke-Buchanan Company.

⁶²*Hastings Daily Tribune*, January 24, 1929; January 25, 1929.

⁶³*Ibid.*, January 28, 1929.

⁶⁴*Ministerial Association*, January 28, 1929.

⁶⁵*Record, Hastings, Nebraska*, January 28, 1929.

⁶⁶*Hastings Daily Tribune*, January 28, 1929; January 29, 1929; January 31, 1929; February 1, 1929.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, February 2, 1929; February 4, 1929; February 5, 1929; February 6, 1929; February 7, 1929; February 8, 1929; *Hastings Democrat*, February 7, 1929.

⁶⁸*Hastings Daily Tribune*, January 5, 1929.

⁶⁹Joseph Brannigan, interview with author, Hastings, Nebraska, April 5, 1975.

⁷⁰*Hastings Daily Tribune*, January 16, 1929; January 28, 1929; January 29, 1929; February 2, 1929; February 4, 1929.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, January 31, 1929; February 1, 1929; February 2, 1929; February 6, 1929; February 7, 1929. See also note 74.

⁷²*Record, Hastings, Nebraska*, February 11, 1929.

⁷³*Hastings Democrat*, February 7, 1929.

⁷⁴*Hastings Daily Tribune*, January 15, 1929.

⁷⁵*Hastings Democrat*, February 7, 1929.

⁷⁶*Hastings Daily Tribune*, February 4, 1929; *Hastings Democrat*, February 7, 1929.

⁷⁷*Hastings Daily Tribune*, February 7, 1929; *Hastings Democrat*, February 7, 1929.

⁷⁸*Record, Hastings, Nebraska*, February 11, 1929; April 23, 1928; April 28, 1929; April 7, 1930.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, February 11, 1929.

⁸⁰*Hastings Daily Tribune*, February 22, 1929; February 18, 1929; March 4, 1929; *Hastings Democrat*, March 7, 1929.

⁸¹*Ministerial Association*, March 6, 1929.

⁸²Mrs. Jean McMillan, interview with author, Hastings, Nebraska, March 27, 1975.

⁸³*Record, Hastings, Nebraska*, April 8, 1929, shows the reelection of William Harm and P.R. Renner as councilmen. *Record, Hastings, Nebraska*, April 7, 1930, shows the reelection of G.H. Hunt, R.H. Kerr, Walter G. Stewart, and R.M. Van Gilder that year.

⁸⁴*Record, Hastings, Nebraska*, February 11, 1929, for the special election; April 8, 1929, for the municipal election.

⁸⁵*Hastings Daily Tribune*, August 28, 1917.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, March 4, 1929, tells of the filing change; *Record, Hastings, Nebraska*, April 8, 1929, gives the election results.

⁸⁷Dorothy Weyer Creigh, *Adams County: The Story* (Hastings, Nebraska, 1972), 371.

⁸⁸Don S. Kirschner, *City and Country; Rural Responses to Urbanization in the 1920s* (Westport, Connecticut, 1970), 249-50.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 250.

⁹⁰Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday* (New York, 1931), 163-64.