

## **Timeline of the Park Forest Movie Theater** Jane Nicoll 9-2010

Built in 1950 as Part of "Park Forest Shoppers' Plaza."

Architects of the original building: Loeb, Schlossman and Bennett.

Decorated by Hanns R. Teichert for the firm?

**Holiday Theatre 1950** Owners: American Community Builders

October 28, 1950 (opening day)--mid-1952. Name: Holiday Theatre Leased by: H. & E. Balaban Corporation; Harry and Elmer Balaban; also owners of the Esquire and Surf theaters in Chicago. Related to Balaban and Katz theater owners in Chicago.

**Holiday Theatre 1953** Owners: American Community Builders

**January 1, 1953--1978.** Leased by: William C. Mallers of Bluffton, Indiana, and his cousins, (not his brothers) George and Roger Scherer of Munster, Indiana. Scherer also operated a theater in Lansing, Illinois.

"Tight Little Island," "Huckleberry Finn," and "The Red Shoes" First films shown.

1966-1967 Manager: Robert "Bob" Parker

**Holiday Theatre 1978-1981** Probably still operated under the Mallers family business, without William.

**Park Forest Theatre**

**1981-1986.** Leased by Classic Cinemas, operated by Willis and Shirley Johnson.

1987? Leased and operated by ?

**Park Forest Theatre**

Owned by Cordish and Embry, Centre Shopping Center. In 1987, renovation of the shopping center was underway.

**October 23, 1987 (opened).** Leased by a group represented by Marcia Gevers, local attorney and PF resident for 12 years. Opened as one screen, but intended to divide the auditorium into 3 screens, including one in the balcony. Renovated, new seats, concession stand, decor and carpeting. "Dragnet" first film shown.

**May 5, 1989 Park Forest Theatre closed for business.** In litigation with the landlord.

**Centre Cinema**

Owner: Erie Development Corporation Previous owner, or Erie, had declared bankruptcy.

Leased by Willis and Shirley Johnson of Downers Grove, Illinois, for the second time.

**Theater opened February 9, 10, 11, 1990.** December 26, 1989, Chasing light marquee sign on Lakewood Blvd side of the building was approved by Village of Park Forest. Quality Construction of Crete was the major contractor who remodeled the existing building into three theaters for the Willis' They restored a nostalgic 50s look, with three screens. The main auditorium was divided into two long theaters, with a third screen put in the balcony. They later restored the cry room. Subsequently, the balcony was divided into two screens, and a storefront to the east of the lobby was converted to a fifth screen.

Tickets were \$1.50.

The Johnsons owned Tivoli Enterprises. Films were booked through Johnson Theatre Service. Classic Cinemas was a chain of 11 movie theaters in 10 communities including The Paramount in Kankakee, Lake Theater in Oak Park (both Art Deco), Hinsdale Theater, Tivoli in Downers Grove, York Theater in Elmhurst, and theaters in Freeport and Skokie.

**Centre Cinema** Same lessee. 1993 The fifth was transformed to an "art house" venue, with 105 seats.

**December 1995. The Village of Park Forest purchased the shopping center in December 1995 from Erie Development Company. Renamed the shopping center, Downtown Park Forest.**

**Classic Cinema's Park Forest Theatre** name change or just newspaper title?  
Still operated by Willis and Shirley Johnson.

April 1997 Ed Doherty, manager. 5 screens, 1089 seats, total with 105 seats in the Art Theatre.

September 21, 1997 article in Chicago Sun Times, "Cinema Owner a '90s Man About Downtown." States Willis Johnson hopes to buy the building in Park Forest and is encouraging the street being cut through the shopping center, and use by the Village of the Lakota Group, planners.

**June 22, 1998.** Park Forest Village Board accepted Tivoli Enterprises offer to purchase the Park Forest Theater building and 13 adjacent storefronts in Downtown Park Forest for \$300,000. This made Willis Johnson owner of 15% of Downtown. The sale closed ca.

**July 15, 1998.** Johnson had been involved in renovations of Oak Park, Elmhurst and Downers Grove downtowns. He had rewired, re-roofed and installed new plumbing in several locations of the theater.

Three light fixtures put in the theater were from the old United Artists Theater in Chicago, as well as pictures of movie stars measuring 4' x 4' were retrieved from the Tivoli, which Johnson had also owned.

**November 11, 1999** The Star Newspaper.

The Park Forest Theatre and the Tall Grass Arts Association begin the Film Series, reviving the "Art Theater" for at least occasional evenings.

**September 2000.** The tax bill assessed value was \$1.88 million, 6 times the original appraised value. Property tax for that year equaled \$333,284, more than Willis paid for the building. Willis sought an appeal with support of the Village.

High operating costs led to the business not being profitable.

**Theater closed by Willis Johnson in 2002.**

### **Park Forest Cinemas**

**December 11, 2002** Classic Cinemas reopened. ( December 8, 2002 The Star Newspaper).

Owner: Sensible Cinemas, Mark McSparin, operator, owns several theaters in Illinois. Price up from \$2 to \$3 after 6 p.m. The new price allowed the theater to get movies 4-8 weeks sooner than it had. Lowered refreshment prices.

First films shown included, "The Truth about Charlie," "Red Dragon" and "I Spy."

**December 2004 Theater closed.**

### **January 2005**

Matanky Realty Group purchased the buildings in January 2005. (Reported in The Star, March 27, 2005.) \$300,000 investment. **Operator: George Smiley of Elgin, president of Park Forest Cinemas, Inc. Leased from Matanky.**

Smiley was founder and principal stockholder in Nova Cinetech, a 15-theater chain in the Midwest and the South.

"The Park Forest Theatre will reopen in late spring under the direction of an area man with more than 30 years of experience in movie theaters."

The theater to play "first run movies" two to eight weeks after they are released nationally and will feature \$3.50 admission fees and competitively priced concessions.

Smiley's partner is Eric Grubelman, majority partner in Eagle Theater, a Community theater in Robinson, Illinois.

### **Eagle Theater**

**January 2006? Eric Grubelman, independent operator**, who also operated the Eagle Theater in Robinson, Illinois. Park Forest Cinemas, Inc.

**Park Forest Theater on marquee.**

2008

Matanky Realty Group, owners. Operator: Smiley/Grubelman?.

**Holiday Star Theater.** "Park Forest Theater" still on marquee.

**February 2010.**

Matanky Realty Group. owners. Operator: Ken Yochelson, February-September 2010. Holiday Star on all pr and has a colorful logo used inside the theater. Innovative outreach. Theater repainted outside and partially inside. Bathrooms rehabbed.

September 6, 2010. Ken Yochelson, actually Ken Aaron, arrested for alleged fraud.

**September 2010** Matanky Realty Group took over operation. Katrina Zaret, acting manager. Searching for a new operator.