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# “The Eternal Triangle of Barrie Moviedom”
## Reproducing Metropolitan Cinema Competition in the Hinterland

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Article abstract

*Between 1908 and 1938, Barrie went from having no permanent movie theatres to the city with the most per capita in the county. Barrie not only furnished a sizable audience, but one large enough to sustain multiple theatres that seated 600, reinforcing the importance of studying rural audiences. By examining the development of cinema, the struggles between theatre operators, and how local audiences interacted with the new medium it becomes clear that people in Barrie and comparable rural municipalities engaged with cinema in similar but not identical ways as those in large urban centres. This study shifts the current dialogue from one of metropole imposing change on the periphery to a better understanding of rural theatre culture as a unique entity worthy of study.*

# "The Eternal Triangle of Barrie Moviedom"

## Reproducing Metropolitan Cinema Competition in the Hinterland*

by Aaron E. Armstrong

On 21 August 1931, Richard F. Garrett was installing a billboard advertising his *Capitol* theatre, in the process removing two show cards for the rival *Roxy* theatre, when the owner of the *Roxy* accosted Garrett and "registered a vigorous objection to the removal."[1] As Gaetana Saso grabbed her show cards and left, Garrett scolded her to "go along—she has a face like a wop." Returning shortly with a hammer and nails, Saso shouted to Garrett "I'll show you, you dirty yellow dog!" and reinstalled her signs while uttering a litany of 'foul language' the local paper found unfit to reprint. With her task finished, Saso turned to leave when Garrett proceeded to pry the signs off with a stick, tearing them in two. Saso testified that "this angered her so that she raised the hammer and rushed at him. 'I'll cut the face off you the way you cut my sign, you dirty yellow dog.'"[2] While no one was injured in the ensuing scuffle, this altercation was one of many battles between Garrett and the Saso family, though by far the most physical.

The battlegrounds of the rivalry between Gaetana and John Saso and Richard F. Garrett were the Barrie courts, on the single street where both sides operated cinemas, and most visibly in the local newspapers. In Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery's *Film History: Theory and Practice*, the authors outline the kinds of competition that prevailed in

*The author would like to thank Katherine Spring, in whose graduate seminar this project began, and who offered thoughtful criticism that improved this paper substantially. Paul Moore's comments on this paper helped refine the focus, and his work is cited throughout. Brianna Armstrong and Alex Gagne's comments on earlier drafts were also greatly helpful. Alice and Charlotte Armstrong, this is for you.

[1] "Police Court Fans treated to Free Show," *Northern Advance,* 17 September 1931, p1, c6.

[2] "*Ibid*., p6, c3.

## Abstract

*Between 1908 and 1938, Barrie went from having no permanent movie theatres to the city with the most per capita in the county. Barrie not only furnished a sizable audience, but one large enough to sustain multiple theatres that seated 600, reinforcing the importance of studying rural audiences. By examining the development of cinema, the struggles between theatre operators, and how local audiences interacted with the new medium it becomes clear that people in Barrie and comparable rural municipalities engaged with cinema in similar but not identical ways as those in large urban centres. This study shifts the current dialogue from one of metropole imposing change on the periphery to a better understanding of rural theatre culture as a unique entity worthy of study.*

***Résumé:*** *Entre 1908 et 1938, la ville de Barrie est passée de l'absence de cinémas au nombre leplus élevé par habitant du comté. La ville de Barrie avait non seulement fourni un public considérable, mais un public assez important pour alimenter plusieurs cinémas d'une capacité de 600 places, soulignant l'importance d'une étude de l'auditoire rural. En examinant la chronologie du développement du cinéma, la lutte entre les cinémas pour la dominance économique et la relation entre l'auditoire local et le nouveau média, il devient évident que la population de Barrie et de municipalités rurales similaires se comportait de façon comparable, mais pas identique, à celle des populations de centres urbains. Dans cet article, nous allons réorienter le cadre du dialogue actuel centré sur l'influence des métropoles sur les périphéries, vers une meilleure compréhension d'une culture cinéphile rurale en tant qu'entité unique digne d'étude.*


the early years of Hollywood, but these features are just as easily applied to the efforts of Barrie theatre moguls, in their attempts to control local cinema.[3] The efforts to appeal to Barrie audiences seems more like a struggle between individuals, rather than between multiple theatres. The general themes of competition between the Sasos and Garrett are similar to the kinds of competition in metropolitan Canada and the United States, contesting the standard narrative of metropolitan hegemony over cinema and audience development, and the vertical integration of national chains.

While Saso ascendancy was cemented in the late 1930s thanks in part to a partnership with Famous Players, local competition did not suddenly cease once the national chain came to town. Though Saso's *Roxy* was sold to Famous Players in 1962, the national chain never had a monopoly on cinema in Barrie, with Garrett's *Imperial* being sold to another local chain, Stinson Theatres, in the mid 1960s, and at time of publication the theatre still operates under private ownership.[4] The history of early cinema devel-

[3] Robert C Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 143.

[4] AiMS Environmental, *Phase I Environmental Site Assessment, 43 to 59 Dunlop & 33 to 35 Mary*

*Gaetana and John Saso, <bondifamily.weebly.com>*

opment in Barrie, and in small cities and towns across Ontario, would be incomplete without also including what makes the locale unique, in this case including the spectacular end to nickelodeons and the seemingly unending legal battles between theatre operators. Considering how local markets reproduced or recoiled from the characteristics of metropolitan cinema development delivers a more robust and nuanced narrative, one that acknowledges the agency of local players in the creation of a mass moviegoing market.

Film historian Paul Moore wrote in 2012 that "simply noting the existence of an audience outside metropolitan cities is in itself a significant fact."[5] That a town like Barrie not only furnished a sizable audience, but that this audience was large enough to sustain multiple theatres with a capacity of 600 seats reinforces the importance of studying non-urban audiences.[6] While more theatres were built and maintained in large urban centres, moviegoing can only be seen as a national pastime if people from all walks of life made film a regular part of their lives. Cinema seems to have quickly enraptured Barrie citizens, and this study joins recent work in shifting the dialogue from one of metropole imposing change on

*Street, Barrie* (City of Barrie ESA Report, 2013), 7-10, 72-73.

[5] Paul Moore, "Mapping the Mass Circulation of Early Cinema: Film Debuts Coast-to-Coast in Canada in 1896 and 1897," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 21:1 (2012), 60-61.

[6] "Early History of Barrie Theatres," *Barrie Examiner,* 19 October 1953, p9, c4-7.

the periphery to a better understanding of hinterland theatre culture as a unique entity worthy of study.[7]

Canadian cinema development has garnered less academic interest than other national contexts, for example the development of Hollywood, though there has been renewed interest in the field. And other than a handful of studies which focus on small towns, the focus has been on the large urban centres and how cinema culture developed there. Take, for example, Robert Allen's "Manhattan Myopia: Or, Oh! Iowa."[8] This article, and Allen's work thereafter, has emphasized the importance of avoiding the tunnel vision of studying metropolitan cinema in isolation, and is often quoted by Canadian film historians.[9] Reinforcing the lack of scholarship on Canadian cinema, the focus on Allen's work highlights that there is no seminal work on a 'Toronto Myopia,' and that Canadians still define their work by referencing the American. Thus, the lens of cinema history is skewed southward and toward the urban. Nor is this focus limited to the early period of cinema development, with scholars such as George Melnyk and Darrell Varga studying the late twentieth century, while still focused on the metropolitan.[10]

Published in 1978, Peter Morris' *Embattled Shadows: A History of Canadian Cinema, 1895-1939* is still considered by many to be the seminal text in Canadian film history. *Embattled Shadows* is a survey of the early development of the industry in Canada, and Morris' stated goal was to "chronicle film activities in Canada before the establishment of the National Film Board... [making] no claims for the book's definitiveness."[11] Morris frames his book as a study of Canadian cinema writ large, but like much of the historiography inordinately concentrates on Torontonian cinema practices, and thus fails to explore the complexity and diversity of experiences nation, or even province, wide. Some scholars are explicit about their focus on metropolitan impact, such as George Melnyk's "The

[7] See Jessica L. Whitehead, "The Business of 'Wholesome Entertainment': The Mascioli Film Circuit of Northeastern Ontario," *Rural Cinema Exhibition and Audiences in a Global Context*, ed. Daniela Treveri Gennari, Danielle Hipkins, and Catherine O'Rawe (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 47-70; Paul Moore, "The Social Biograph: Newspapers as Archives for the Regional Mass Market for Movies," *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, ed. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 263-279.

[8] Robert C Allen, "Manhattan Myopia; or, Oh! Iowa," *Cinema Journal* 35:3 (1996), 75-103.

[9] Moore, "Mapping," 61; Moore, "The Social Biograph," 264; Jessica Whitehead, "Movie-Going on the Margins: The Mascioli Film Circuit of Northeastern Ontario," (Ph.D. diss., York University, 2018), 12.

[10] See for example George Melnyk, *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); George Melnyk, *The City: The Urban Imaginary in Canadian Cinema* (Edmonton: Athabasca University, 2014); Darrell Varga, "Regional Scenes and Canadian Screens: Film in Atlantic Canada," in *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Cinema*, ed. Janine Marchessault and Will Straw (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 185-200.

[11] Peter Morris, *Embattled Shadows: A History of Canadian Cinema, 1895-1939* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1978), ix.

Imagined City: Toward a Theory of Urbanity in Canadian Cinema," or Robert Gutteridge's *Magic Moments: First 20 Years of Moving Pictures in Toronto (1894-1914)*, while others take the same path as Morris, claiming metropolitan experience as universal, for example several essays by Marta Braun and Charlie Keil, and Peter Steven's "Pleasing the Canadians: A National Flavour for Early Cinema, 1896-1914."

A considerable challenge to this 'Toronto Myopia' has been set by Paul Moore's work, as he has argued that while "metropolitan cities might be privileged as sites of heightened exchange and concentrated activity... they do not monopolize mass practices that... circulate across the entire public."[12] Moore has argued for a relational exploration of cinema development as it "esteems novelty and innovative breaks, whereas continuity and gradual cultural change is made evident in a spatial approach that aims to map the relation between metropolis and periphery."[13] By setting a precedent for regional studies with a focus on ascertaining how local audiences were created, and how moviegoing became a national pastime, Moore's work promotes of a focus on region over metropolis, which has helped open the door to more recent work such as that of Jessica Whitehead.[14] Whitehead's dissertation and her 2018 chapter, "The Business of 'Wholesome Entertainment': The Mascioli Film Circuit of Northeastern Ontario," focus on what she defines as the hinterland of Ontario, a region "integral to the economic development of Ontario," but distant from centres of population and political power.[15] By focusing on how one theater mogul in Timmins interacted with national chains, and the ways in which vertical integration (the process of national chains controlling everything from film creation to distribution) played out on a local level, Whitehead problematizes the simplistic narrative that Torontonian practices were replicated *ad infinitum* across Ontario.[16]

The work of Moore and Whitehead serve to clearly illustrate the depth and breadth of source material available across Ontario, emphasizing that a metropolitan focus is not justifiable, especially as more material becomes available via online databases.[17] Thus the present study surveys the early years of cinema development in Barrie to examine how local particularity interacted with metropolitan norms to create a cinema culture

[12] Moore, "Mapping," 60.

[13] *Ibid*.

[14] Paul Moore, *Now Playing: Early Moviegoing and the Regulation of Fun* (Albany: University of New York Press, 2012), 9.

[15] Whitehead, "Business of 'Wholesome Entertainment,'" 50.

[16] Whitehead, "Business of 'Wholesome Entertainment.'"

[17] Examples of these include newspapers available through OurOntario.ca, Marta Braun and Charlie Keil's *Early Cinema Filmography of Ontario* Database project <imagearts.ryerson.ca/ecfo>, and Robert G. Clarke's project "An Illustrated Book on Peterborough's Movie-Going History" <peterboroughmoviehistory.com>.

that was both unique to this locale, but also a reproduction of regional trends.

In February 1908, Muir and Frank Streb opened *Dreamland*, Barrie's first theatre capable of playing film and the first business in town to have an electric sign.[18] Following hard on the heels of *Dreamland*'s opening, a nickelodeon called *Crystal* opened in an unused music hall, but was only in operation for three months before it burnt down.[19] With a second nickelodeon opening in 1915, Barrie was already well served for theatres, yet this was only the beginning of theatre construction.[20] In 1920, *Dreamland*'s newest owner R.F. Garrett relocated and expanded the theatre to 650 seats, renamed it *New Dreamland*, then leased it so he could build *Capitol*, a 600 seat theatre further down Dunlop Street.[21] By 1920 Garrett was already an established business owner and a municipal councillor, and his entrance into cinema signalled the beginning of a new era in Barrie cinema history. Sometime between 1923 and 1927 Italian immigrant John Saso became a co-lessee and the operator of *New Dreamland* and by 1931 Saso had built his own theatre in Barrie, *Roxy*, and operated it and *New Dreamland* simultaneously. Built directly across Dunlop Street from Garrett's *Capitol*, *Roxy* was part of Saso's rapidly expanding theatre chain as by the end of 1930 he was also the head of a chain which included the *Bijou* in Penetanguishene, and the *Gayety* in Collingwood, both towns within fifty kilometers of Barrie.[22] Beyond his work with cinema


*Advertisement for the New Dreamland, featuring a notice for "a big yo-yo contest." Barrie Examiner 7 May 1931, p9, c6.*

[18] "The handsome new electric sign at the Queen's Hotel is attracting a good deal of attention," *Barrie Examiner*, 19 April 1900, p1, c4.

[19] "Crystal' Barrie's New Moving Picture Palace opened in former music hall on Wednesday night," *Barrie Examiner*, 26 August 1909, p1, c2.

[20] *Allendale* was opened by A. Patton in September 1915 but did not advertise in the local papers and was not referenced after 1916. "Ward 6 News," *Northern Advance*, 30 September 1915, p5, c1.

[21] With the exception of *Allendale*, all the theatres discussed in this paper were built on the same street in what is now downtown Barrie. Su Murdoch, "The Roxy Theatre Neighbourhood: Dunlop Street West and Maple Avenue, Barrie," Simcoe County Archives 998-35, E8 B4 R6B S7 SH1.

[22] The management of Saso's theatre chain seemingly revolved around four people, John and Gaetana

Saso was also a successful fruit store operator, owning two stores in Barrie, one of which was built into the *Roxy*.[23] In 1936, Garrett sold *Capitol* to Hanson Theatres, and the next year opened *Imperial*, right beside *Capitol* and directly across the street from *Roxy*. Saso acted quickly and leased *Capitol*, renamed *Granada*, showing only B-list movies there, reserving A-list movies for *Roxy*. This was the end of theatre building in Barrie until the late 1950s, however this sketch of the early cinema history in Barrie is little more than an outline of cinema development in the city and does little to emphasize the complexity of theatre development in the city.

Competition was fierce between theatres, and there was little room for the small nickelodeon, or theatorium, cinemas that were prevalent in urban centres in Canada and the United States. There were only two nickelodeons that opened in Barrie, neither of which lasted very long. A. Paton's *Allendale* was said to have opened in 1915, but after that year there is no mention of it in the local papers.[24] The *Allendale* followed typical trends for nickelodeons, as even in urban centres "there was almost a fifty-fifty chance that a nickelodeon operating [between 1907 and 1920] would be out of business a year later."[25] However, the fate of *Crystal* is far more sensational.

In 1909, S.J. Guthrie and his family moved to Barrie from Peterborough and opened a small theatre in an unused music hall. In operation by late August, *Crystal* had daily matinees and evening shows with "illustrated songs" and admission was "always 5c."[26] On 17 November 1909, *Crystal* and the Guthrie home were destroyed by fire, taking along several adjacent buildings, and evidence of arson was found in both places. A subsequent inquest was led by Barrie's coroner to determine the cause of the blaze, with the main witnesses being S.J. Guthrie's wife and children.[27] S.J. Guthrie had left for Peterborough on 16 November to check in on his store there and returned after the inquest had begun. Mrs. Theresa Guthrie claimed that on the evening of 17 November she had left her home for the *Crystal* around six pm., and when she returned at ten-thirty her home was on fire.[28] She claimed to not know about the fire at the theatre until after midnight, by

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Saso, Art Leatherby, Samuel Russ. Far from being a silent partner in the family's success, Gaetana was instrumental in negotiating with distribution chains, and "when dissatisfied with the attendance at the film, would venture to Toronto to meet with executives... and lodge her complaint. Part of her documentation was a careful count of the attendance" at rival theatres. Murdoch, 36.

[23] "Barrie to Have New Theatre," *Northern Advance*, 18 December 1930, p1, c6.

[24] "Ward 6 News," *Northern Advance,* 30 September 1915, p5, c1; "Allendale Musicians," *Northern Advance,* 21 October 1915, p5, c1.

[25] Ben Singer, "Manhattan Nickelodeons: New Data on Audiences and Exhibitors," *Cinema Journal* 34:3 (1995), 29.

[26] "Crystal," *Barrie Examiner,* 26 August 1909, p1, c2.

[27] "What Caused the Fires," *Northern Advance,* 25 November 1909, p3, c4-5.

[28] *Ibid*., p3, c4.


*The Roxy theatre, 1942. Unknown source. <https://www.reddit.com/r/barrie/comments/3qqcdv/roxy_theatre_dunlop_st_w_1942/>*

which point all that remained was the front exterior wall. The lawyer for the City of Barrie told the jury that while the Guthrie's had taken out insurance on their home in September, they had placed an $800 insurance policy on the theatre on the day of the fires.[29] When asked why she had waited so long to get this insurance, Mrs. Guthrie refused to answer and when pressed angrily replied that "it was curiosity that killed the cat."[30] This apparent threat notwithstanding, Mrs. Guthrie completed her narration of events, telling the jury that she had not gotten insurance before because she "had not thought to do so," and that the rumours of her involvement in starting the fires were nothing more than rumours.[31]

A later discovery that two trunks filled with personal items from the Guthrie home had been sent to a boarding house the day before the fires fuelled speculations of Mrs. Guthrie's culpability, but it was not until Clara Guthrie, the daughter of S.J. and Theresa, was questioned that the truth came out. Clara claimed to have been visiting with friends on 17 November, but witnesses placed her as having taken a rented coach, disguised and under the name Miss. Meeks, from their home to the boarding house where the trunks were found.[32] Following these revelations, Theresa and Clara Guthrie were charged with perjury, having lied to the inquest jury, and Mrs. Guthrie was charged with arson and insurance fraud.[33] Bail was set for each at $250 and was paid by S.J. Guthrie.

On 9 December, two days prior to the beginning of the formal criminal trial, Mrs. Guthrie disappeared from

[29] "What Caused the Fires," *Northern Advance,* 25 November 1909, p3, c5.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] "Sensational Find by Jury," *Barrie Examiner,* 25 November 1909, p1, c5-7.

[32] *Ibid.*, p1, c7.

[33] "Charged," *Northern Advance,* 2 December 1909, p1, c5.


*Capitol Theatre with potential moviegoers, 1933. Barrie Historical Archive. <https://www.barriearchive.ca/piece/the-exterior-of-capitol-theatre-on-dunlop-street-west/>*

her home in the middle of the night after her husband had again left town on business.[34] While Clara Guthrie feared that her mother had "committed suicide by drowning herself in the bay," reports of a suspicious looking passenger on a North-bound train excited the interest of the local papers.[35] The train conductor wrote to the *Northern Advance* claiming that "a woman attired in male garb with a lumberman's cap pulled well down on her head to conceal her hair, boarded his train at Orillia... on [the train's] arrival at Burk's Falls he found his masquerader had disappeared and was informed she had jumped off the train."[36] In her absence, the judge issued an arrest warrant, but Mrs. Guthrie successfully avoided capture and was never tried. Clara Guthrie's trial for perjury lasted only one day, as her defence attorney and future Mayor of Barrie William Boys, successfully argued that the coroner's inquest testimony could not be used as evidence as it had been transcribed without the consent of the legal counsel for the Guthrie family.[37] This dramatic affair ended with no convictions, and the remaining Guthrie family moved back to Peterborough early in 1910. There is no mention in the local papers whether they received the insurance money, though this seems unlikely.

This sensational end to nickelodeons in Barrie is important for two reasons. First, the focus on urban cinema history as more interesting or exciting than rural history becomes exposed as patently untrue when reading the coverage of the inquest and subsequent trial. Second, it seems that the motivation for setting fire to their theatre was financial, as *Crystal* was unable to compete with *Dreamland* as an already established theatre. With

[34] "Did Mrs. Guthrie Go North?" *Barrie Examiner,* 9 December 1909, p1, c5-6.

[35] *Ibid*., p1, c5.

[36] *Ibid*.,p1, c5-6.

[37] "Clara Guthrie Freed Owing to a Technicality," *Barrie Examiner,* 23 December 1909, p7, c3-6.

the failure of two small theatres between 1909 and 1916, it becomes clear that Barrie was a competitive market for cinema, and, more importantly, sustained a level of competition similar to that in major cities like Toronto.

The most visible kind of competition between Garrett and Saso was how they differentiated their theatres from other venues. While they tried to make their theatres stand out, both men adopted similar promotional methods with their giveaways and advertising. In many of the earlier ads for *New Dreamland* and *Capitol*, Garrett would promote that week's program with a small, single column article or poster. However, beginning in the late 1920s the advertisements for *Capitol* became more and more elaborate to keep pace with *Dreamland* under Saso's operation. Full column advertisements were used more and more often by both Garrett and Saso, and they usually contained images from film posters. The competition intensified so much that by 1931 there was usually a full column ad for each theatre, *Capitol* and *Roxy*, on a single page.[38] In 1938, Garrett was also resorting to full page ads for *Imperial*, while Saso had simply begun to advertise all his Barrie theatres in the same space.[39] These visual advertisements differed little in form for most of the period, though if one of these men changed the way their advertisements looked, the other would adapt quickly, usually for the next issue of that paper.

The similarity of these advertisements lies not only in the format, but also in the content of the ads. As mentioned above, most of the later ads feature images from the films, and it was unusual to see an ad without some image after 1928. However, the language used in the advertisements also changed over the period. Prior to 1926, most advertising of specific films was done without reference to the actors or the producing studio. From 1927 on, it was equally unusual to see an ad without the actor's name prominently displayed.[40] Audiences may not have cared which theatre they were patronizing, "but they would stand in line for hours to see a [film] with Mary Pickford or Douglas Fairbanks."[41] With the names of stars often printed larger than the film titles, Garrett and Saso were undoubtedly aware of the draw that specific movie stars had and used this to their advantage.[42]

Another common tactic to encourage patrons to come to a specific theatre or on a specific night was to offer a gift to audiences. While often this would be a single night event, such as when *New Dreamland* gave free yo-yos to children

[38] *Barrie Examiner* 21 May 1931, p9, c1 & 6.

[39] Ad for Imperial, *Barrie Examiner,* 25 October 1938, p8; Ad for Roxy and Granada, *Northern Advance,* 25 October 1938, p3, c5.

[40] Allen and Gomery, *Film History*, 148.

[41] *Ibid*.

[42] Ad for Capitol, *Barrie Examiner,* 7 May 1931, p9, c1; Ad for Dreamland, *Barrie Examiner,* 29 January 1931, p8, c1.

attending the matinee in 1931, there were offers which required frequent attendance.[43] Beginning on Monday 24 October, 1938 the *Imperial* was giving away a "70-piece Haddon Hall Service, Fine Embossed Dinnerware, free to ladies."[44] Giving away one piece per night, and a different piece on Thursdays than on Mondays, the *Imperial* hoped to encourage women to attend twice a week for over four months.[45] While the commitment was substantial, *Imperial* was sure to remind the reader that the dinnerware was "worth more than our admission price!"[46] Silverware was a common giveaway, and typically each theatre had one such giveaway each year, often around early December.

While many of the advertising methods were similar in form, but different in content, they serve to illustrate how common forms of advertisement in urban centres were often adapted for rural audiences. Paul Moore writes that these kinds of advertisements were developed thanks to limitations placed on "the use of handbills, programs, gramophones, posters, electric signs, and ornamental facades."[47] In a city the size of Barrie however, those kinds of promotion were rarely used as they proved to be ineffective. Consequently, in Barrie, the process of newspaper ads *replacing* "sidewalk ballyhoo" never occurred, as the main form of advertising was always through the papers, and with the exception of posters in front of the theatre itself, there was little paid promotion outside of newspapers.[48]

While there were few barriers to entering the cinema business in the early years in Barrie, as time went on those who were already involved repeatedly attempted to obstruct and prevent competition. Though these attempts failed, they are indicative of the desire to prohibit newcomers into the local industry, a trait similar to urban competition.[49] In June 1923 Charles Beatty, the lessee of *New Dreamland*, petitioned the City of Barrie requesting that "no further licenses be granted for theatres in Barrie," claiming that the citizens were well served as far as theatre capacity went.[50] This motion failed as the city council felt that if someone was willing to pay to build a theatre that they should be able to do so. Interestingly, this petition had no direct stimulus other than the construction of Garrett's *Capitol*. What prompted Beatty to petition council is unknown, as there were no plans for new theatres after *Capitol*, and none would be built for almost a decade. Beatty's failure to limit competition, and council's willingness to allow

[43] Ad for New Dreamland, *Barrie Examiner,* 7 May 1931, p9, c6.
[44] Ad for Imperial, *Northern Advance,* 25 October 1938, p8, c1.
[45] *Ibid.*
[46] *Ibid.*
[47] Moore, *Now Playing*, 180.
[48] *Ibid.*
[49] *Ibid.*, 77.
[50] "At Council," *Northern Advance,* 21 June 1923, p1, c6.


*Capitol Theatre, 1935. Barrie Historical Archive. <https://www.barriearchive.ca/piece/looking-at-the-front-of-capitol-theatre-on-dunlop-street-west/>*

it, illustrates the beginning of a trend of theatre owners trying to slow their competitors down through legal means and failing.

The next case of this kind of competition came in 1930 when Garrett filed a court injunction to stop Mrs. Beatty and John Saso completing renovations to *New Dreamland*. Saso had planned on outfitting the theatre with new equipment so he could play movies with sound, and Garrett argued that such renovations would lower the value of his property.[51] Garrett's argument proved unconvincing, and the presiding judge allowed Saso to complete the renovations, so long as the theatre was returned to its original condition by the expiry of the lease in 1933.[52] As Garrett had just converted *Capitol* to sound several months before, the likelihood that he was concerned about property damage is less likely than he simply wanted to avoid having to compete with Saso if at all possible. Though Garrett sued Saso in 1933, claiming that the latter had not returned the theatre to its original state as agreed, the judge again sided with Saso and Garrett had to pay legal fees. Surprisingly, Garrett continued to lease to Mrs. Beatty for several years, implying that court proceedings were simply attempts to limit his competition, and when they failed Garrett was willing to turn to other means. Garrett's

[51] "Theatre Injunction Quietly Settled," *Northern Advance,* 1 May 1930, p1, c3.

[52] *Ibid*.

proclivity to launch superfluous lawsuits was noted by a defence attorney in 1931, by which point the theatre owner had pursued litigation on "twelve or thirteen" different occasions.[53] Competition between Barrie theatre owners thus reproduced urban competition with the same kinds of advertisements in the local newspapers, similar efforts to restrict entry into the industry, and attempts to differentiate a product as better than its competition transcended the borders between urban and rural.

The nature of competition shifted in the late 1930s from a rivalry between individuals to an uneven battle between a large national chain and a local theatre owner. In 1936, and with little publicity, the Hanson theatre chain purchased the Capitol from R.F. Garrett.[54] This was the first intervention by a major theatre chain into Barrie, yet seems to have had little direct effect, as it was only in 1937 that Garrett opened a new theatre, *Imperial*, right next door to the *Capitol*. Saso's efforts to expand his control were not slowed either, as he leased *Capitol* from Hanson, and operated it as a venue for B-movies, reserving A-list movies for *Roxy*.[55] While Garrett and the Sasos continued operating their theatres, working with a national chain gave the advantage to the Sasos as they could harness greater purchasing power to tailor a selection of films to the interest of Barrie audiences.

There was no notice in the local papers when Saso partnered with Famous Players at *Roxy*, but the first ad to mention that theatre as exhibiting "Famous Players Entertainment" was 17 July, 1941.[56] By this time, Saso had been leasing *Capitol/Granada* from the chain for three years, during which time he continued to manage his own chain of local theatres. While there was no fanfare at the launch of Saso's partnership with Hanson Theatres/ Famous Players, the 1937 opening of Garrett's *Imperial* received a full column detailing the new theatre's architecture.[57] This noticeable difference between what newspapers deemed "newsworthy... adworthy... [or] note-

[53] Garrett claimed this number to be "two or three." "Police Court Fans treated to Free Show," *Northern Advance,* 17 September 1931, p6, c3.

[54] "Communications," *Northern Advance,* 1 May 1936, p3, c3; "Capitol Theatre Sold," *Barrie Examiner,* 30 April 1936, p 13, c4.

[55] Murdoch, 32. Hanson Theatres was the cause of no small controversy, as while it was purportedly a competitor to Famous Players, the manager of the chain, Oscar Hanson, was an agent of Nathan L. Nathanson, Famous Player's president. This illicit partnership caused serious turmoil across the province, but Barrie seems to have been spared, with the transfer of the *Granada* to Famous Players attracting no notice locally. Pendakur states that when Nathanson's scheme was discovered he was forced to transfer many of these illicitly purchased theatres over to Famous Players. Jessica Whitehead examines the controversies in more detail, including the court battles between Famous Players and Nathanson/Hanson in her dissertation. Manjuanth Pendakur, *Canadian Dreams and American Control: The Political Economy of the Canadian Film Industry* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1990), 96; Whitehead, "Movie-Going on the Margins," esp. 200-207.

[56] Ad, *Barrie Examiner,* 10 July 1941, p8, c1.

[57] "R.F. Garrett's New Theatre," *Northern Advance,* 25 March 1937, p4, c1.

worthy," emphasizes how local theatre ownership and competition reproduced regional and national trends, reframed for a unique local context.

The needs of the local thus framed how Garrett, the Sasos, and theatre owners across the province engaged with their customers, and despite the popularity of cinema in Barrie, there was, especially in the early years, a concern about the medium. Whether focused on its content, censorship, or combustibility, Barrie citizens closely scrutinized the distribution of film in local theatres, with the moral influence of cinema often on the minds of Barrie citizens, as an abundance of newspaper articles and letters attest. Though the crime rate was decreasing in Ontario between 1905 and 1929, that was not the perception of citizens, and films were most often to blame. [58]

The evil tendencies and the number of crimes committed by mere boys, and girls also, nowadays is becoming alarming...Is our educational system at fault, or is there some other cause? From observations we are inclined to think that the picture shows are largely to blame... The minds of children are very susceptible to impressions and boys especially are hero worshippers.[59]

The impressionability of the young was the real concern, and some claimed that children "still remembered 90 per cent of what they had carried away from a picture."[60] Protecting children was seen as of the utmost importance, and not just from films depicting crime. "Love, as Hollywood sees it," could be as morally questionable as depictions of crime, and "the greatest strain emotionally falls upon youth sixteen to eighteen years. When sufficiently strong the strain on the nerves is similar to that of a shell shocked soldier."[61] What may seem like hyperbole to a modern reader a symptom of the fear of a medium over which moral reformers had too little control for their liking.

Debates over cinema's "cultural functions... of 'entertainment' and 'education'" were of course not unique to Barrie, but local distributors had to cater to local concerns while simultaneously navigating their relationship with national distribution companies.[62] This could often be a difficult tightrope to walk, as far from sit back and do nothing about what they saw as an epidemic, local citizens were highly involved in the regulation of what films were shown in Barrie, often criticized the provincial censorship board for not doing enough, and when provincial censorship rules were deemed insufficient, locals took matters into their own hands. For example, in 1932 the Simcoe County Woman's Institute called for the boycott of local theatres when they had "gangster films, [or] those depicting hor-

[58] "Parole System of Ontario Explained," *Northern Advance,* 26 May 1927, p1, c1.

[59] "Letter to the Editor," *Northern Advance,* 4 December 1924, p1, c1.

[60] "Motion Pictures and Crime," *Northern Advance,* 24 October 1935, p2, c2.

[61] "Movies and Your Children," *Northern Advance,* 17 May 1934, p2, c2.

[62] Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 4.

rible crimes committed by monsters of human deformity" on the program.[63] Typical of contemporary social reformer groups, the Simcoe County Woman's Institute intended to help parents whether they wanted the assistance or not; "if the parents do not realize their responsibility in this respect, then it is up to organized women to exercise their influence in protecting Canada's youth from such a dangerous influence."[64] The impact of this group may not have been significant provincially, but the pressure that could be exerted on local theatre owners was substantial, especially when a theatre's target audience was often women and children. Immoral films were not just a bad *influence* on youth, but were sometimes considered to be *guides* to criminal and immoral behaviour, as "boys and girls do commit definite crimes because they have learned the technique in motion pictures; they also learn and practice love technique."[65] These concerns form a motif through the discourse surrounding films and their censorship, with criminality and sexuality decried as the greatest afflictions facing the modern world.

Beyond policing the morality of films, there was a concern about the physical safety of film stock, and by extension, theatres themselves. Fires in theatres across the continent heightened fears of such conflagrations occurring locally, and the speed with which the Crystal burnt in 1909 did little to calm those fears. While minor incidents were bound to happen, an American theatre fire in 1908 resulting in the deaths of 170 people induced "a spate of legislation" designed to protect the public.[66] Though there were never any deaths from fires in Barrie theatres, the burning of the *Crystal* and a small fire in *New Dreamland* in 1931 ensured that Barrie citizens were aware of the risk attendant with moviegoing.[67] Because of these concerns, anytime a new theatre was built, and often in advertisements, the public was reminded that "the new theatre will be entirely fireproof,"[68] or that the "roomy aisles... lead directly to fire exits."[69] Clearly, the concerns over safety were taken seriously by the owners of Barrie's theatres, and even well after film stopped being a serious threat, being labelled 'fireproof' was necessary for any new theatre to succeed.

The trajectories of success for Garrett and the Saso chain were wildly different, with the latter becoming vertically integrated into Famous Players national chain while the former remained locally owned and operated. The efforts of John and Gaetana Saso to tailor vertical integration to their needs and the needs of their audience reinforces the importance

[63] "Picture Censor Board Scored by County W.I." *Northern Advance,* 20 October 1932, p8, c5.
[64] *Ibid*.
[65] "Movies And Your Children," *Northern Advance,* 17 May 1934, p2, c2.
[66] Moore, *Now Playing*, 46.
[67] "Echoes of Old Dreamland Fire," *Northern Advance,* 30 June 1932, p1, c6.
[68] "Barrie to Have New Theatre," *Northern Advance,* 18 December 1930, p1, c6.
[69] "Capitol Theatre Model of Comfort," *Northern Advance,* 4 October 1923, p8, c2.

of including the local context in larger studies of Canadian cinema development, and Richard F. Garrett's continued status as an independent exhibitor highlights how, despite historiographical focus on major chains and metropolitan trends, individual agency needs to be accounted for. The patterns of competition and moviegoing developed in Barrie were similar to those found provincially and nationally, in comparable cities and in metropolitan centres. While it may be unlikely that the owner of a failed theatre would commit arson for the insurance money and then disappear, there is no doubt that similarly sensational events occurred. While Barrie was a small city in a rural county, the number of theatres built in a thirty year span speaks to the importance of this institution locally, and how Barrie reproduced or refracted provincial and national trends highlights the importance of local case studies to the field writ large. By examining the origin and development of the film industry in places like Barrie, the popularity of moviegoing as a national pastime can be more fully explained than when only urban theatres are studied. Rather than assume that the urban experience can be viewed in isolation, or that the urban experience represents all experience, engaging with the history of local moviegoing more intensively brings into focus the creation of national practices of moviegoing and cinema development.