A review of the history of the cinema in Harlingen shows it to have had its peaks and valleys. It has had to contend with the demise of vaudeville that complemented it on the same stages, economic downturns, competition with other media, and especially the advent of television. Still it has innovated and sought to attract both new and old fans. This then is the story of movies in our town, but first a note that theater is also spelled theatre and that there is no difference in their definition.

Some time between 1910 and 1915 a Mr. Denton operated the Rex Theater. E. O. Austin was its projectionist. A 1919 Sanborn Fire Insurance map showed a movie theater located two lots from the southwest corner of 1st and Jackson where a cobbler's shop existed and was soon to be the site of the Rialto Theater. The earlier theater of unknown identity was a galvanized metal building with its projection booth facing the screen on the street side. With but one projector, the movies had to be interrupted while the projectionist changed reels, about every twenty to thirty minutes.

The South Texas Lumber Co. lists an $20 entry 4/6/1917 for R.A. Stevenson and the Dreamland Theater Rent Acct. A photo of 1921 flooding on Monroe Street has written on it the Dreamland Theater. It appears to be a one and a half story brick building on Monroe near the corner of A and not far east of the Verser House on the other side of the street.

The construction of the first major theater in Harlingen started around 9/10/20. Built at the southwest corner of 1st and Jackson Street, the Rialto was to open in 1921 with W. T. Davis as proprietor. It had a small balcony below the projection booth. The admission was 10 cents for children and 25 cents for adults for the usual 1½ hour presentations. Louvered doors on the 1st Street side provided early ventilation and cooling. The circular window in the upper front of the building gave the projectionist some respite from the heat.

Besides the films of the day, stage and talent shows were hosted. Non-denominational Sunday School classes for men were also held in the theater in the 20s and 30s. Davis leased the Rialto to Howard Allen early on. In January 1925, it is F. F. Vincent who is to sell it to Jack Pickens and W. H. Hall of Dallas. They immediately make plans to renovate it. By mid-May Pickens buys out Hall's share. Pickens is to become vice-president of Valley Theaters, Inc. Born in Waxahachie 9/1/98, he was educated in Gilmer, TX. He served 18 months in the army during WWI. He married Claudia Lewis on 1/3/23. This Methodist was a Mason, Rotarian, Elk, and a Chamber of Commerce member.

In the silent movie days various pianists were hired to provide suitable background music. One such individual was Mrs. Earle Rumbo. One projectionist in town was Emmett O. Anglin, the son of Lon C. Hill's right-hand man Elmer Anglin. During the weekdays the movies featured such luminaries as William S. Hart, Rudolph Valentino, Greta Garbo, Thomas Meighan, Richard Dix, Richard Barthelmess, Dolores Del Rio, Ramon Navarro and John Gilbert. On weekends western fare was featured with such stars as Tom Mix, Hoot Gibson, and Tom Maloney.

A Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of February 1925 for Harlingen shows a large "moving picture" structure on the northwest corner of Matamoros (now E) and W. Harrison Streets
just across the street from Porfiro Diaz (now Gutierrez) Park. It is also shown on the July 1929 map. Immediately adjacent to its west is a drug store and a short way down the block on the same side is a dance hall. This theater obviously catered to Hispanics. In the 1931-32 telephone directory this theater at 602 W. Harrison is named the Park Theatre. It is owned or managed by M. F. Dobbs. He and his wife Faye reside on the Combes Highway. By 1935 the theater is no more and has either been subdivided into a residence for four occupants or a new structure has been constructed on the site.

On 6/6/29 the Rialto Theater is to reopen after extensive remodeling, inside and out. It now seats 800 and has new carpeting and drapes plus a new organ to be played by Marjorie Short.

One block west of the Rialto, the Star Theater operated for a short time. Lawson Anglin, another of Elmer's sons and who one day would become a Cameron County highway patrolman, remembered a film at the Star in 1918 about the 101 Ranch in Oklahoma. For publicity the ranch sent a representative along with a "$100,000 jeweled saddle." Anglin lent him a horse to ride up and down the Harlingen streets "ballyhooing" the film with a megaphone. The PBS program "Antiques Roadshow" of 2/16/04 while visiting Oklahoma City also visited a saddle museum there and showed this very saddle. The theater closed shortly after Lawson's effort.

In August 1925 Chris Damants and Joe Hauft built a New Rex Theater on the southwest corner of W. Monroe and North A Streets facing Searle Furniture. Chris Daments and Joe Hauft were at the time operating the popular City Bakery and Candy Kitchen at 113 North A. Constructed by R.E. Ewing for $40,000, the New Rex seats 700. It is leased to Pickens. By 1927 it was too small to accommodate the increasing number of movie fans. On 9/24/26 a new theater corporation is announced, Valley Theaters, Inc. L.L. Dent is president, W.E. Paschall, treasurer, and D.B. Pickens, secretary. Jack Pickens, vice president and manager of the Rialto and Rex is included in the new corporation. Six months later the group announces that it will construct a 1,500 seat theater, the largest south of San Antonio, across from the Rialto. A beautiful sketch of the building to be named The Aztec appears in the paper. Nine months later, on 12/27, plan changes are announced. The New Rex will be closed in January 1928, so its interior can be rebuilt at a cost of $160,000. It is enlarged by building a new structure right over the old one. A pipe organ is also installed. This was to be the Arcadia Theater. It had its grand opening 5/1/28. Audiences at the New Rex saw their first "talkie" on 2/14/27. It featured Edward Everett Horton and Louise Fazenda in "The Terror." The premier movie in the new Arcadia was Richard Dix in "Easy Come, Easy Go."

11/25/28 L.R. Beatty, engineer of Electrical Research Products Inc. begins work installing the Vitaphone movie-tone equipment for talking movie pictures at the Arcadia Theater. To be completed by December 14 according to Jack Pickens, manager, it will be the only "talkie" in the Valley.

An old 1928 photograph of the front of this theater shows its marquee advertising the movie Wings. On the sidewalk in front is a large mockup of a bi-wing plane nosing into the ground. Wings was a silent movie about World War I fighter pilots. In 1929 ceremo-
nies it turned out to be the to be the first film to win the Academy Award for Best Picture, then called "Best Picture, Production." It would be the only silent film ever to do so. On 6/1/70 the Arcadia Theater, operated at the time by the Interstate Theater chain, was to experience a disastrous fire and close its doors forever. A strange reminder of this theater exists on the east end of the garden area of the Grimsell Store. It is the tile flooring at the entrances to the theater.

The Interstate Theater chain began when Karl Hoblitzelle and his brother George invested $2,500 to open Interstate Amusement Company in 1905. They commenced building vaudeville theaters in the South, which at that time had few such theaters as this form of entertainment was characterized as a "Gateway to Hell." Interstate is credited with removing this stigma and turning theater-going into a family-orientated civic and community activity.

As movies began to attract a larger audience than vaudeville Hoblitzelle sold his chain to RKO studio in Hollywood, but he retained ownership of the theaters in Texas' three major cities. When RKO went bankrupt in 1933 he repossessed the other theaters. He then formed a 50/50 partnership with Paramount Pictures in Interstate Circuit, Inc. Later in this year, upon assuming management of Paramount's Publix theaters, mostly in small Texas towns, a second company, Texas Consolidated Theatres was formed. By the mid-1940s Interstate had over 150 theaters in Texas.

In 1948 the Supreme Court in ruling against Paramount Pictures forces the studios to divest their exhibition holdings. There then arise separate film distribution and theater entities. As a result in 1951 Hoblitzelle sold 100% of his stock in Interstate Circuit to United Paramount Theaters, the new exhibition arm of Paramount. He remained manager of it however until his death in 1967.

The Hoblitzelle Foundation, among many other contributions to Texas arts and colleges, is responsible for funding the Texas A & M Experiment Station, Weslaco Hoblitzelle Farm north of Mercedes and the Hoblitzelle Auditorium at the station.

One oldtime Interstate projectionist was George Ayoub. Virgil Sharp and "Pinky" Woodward were others. Sharp went on to manage the triple screen theater on Morgan Boulevard. "Pinky" Woodward was also an old time projectionist.

Jack Pickens, manager of the Arcadia and Rialto movies theaters, announces on 8/10/28 that Harlingen will have the first "talking picture" operation in the Valley when Vitaphone-Movietone and Baby Vitaphone make the installation. On 12/15 the first part-talking feature "The Singing Fool" with Al Jolson and Betty Bronson is shown here, and this is followed by "The Terror".

"The Singing Fool" was the smash hit for Warner Brothers until that time. It grossed over $4 million. It contained the first song to sell over a million copies (eventually 3 million in all). This was "Sonny Boy". Other notable songs in the film were "There's a Rainbow 'round My Shoulder", "I'm Sitting on Top of the World", "Golden Gate", "and "It All Depends on You".

For many this was their first experience with a talking film, since many theaters weren't equipped with sound in 1927 when "The Jazz Singer" was released. In this year the Strand Theater has opened at 111W. Jackson in a building previously occupied by F. W. Woolworth five and dime store. J. C. King is the Strand's manager. When it closes its doors in 1955 Lew Bray is its owner. Bray is noted as one of the founders of the annual "Life Begins at Forty" golf tournament.
1942  The Grande Theater, 507 W. Harrison opens to show Spanish language films. It is managed by Thomas Cantu and owned by Interstate Theaters, which also operates the Rialto and the Strand, both on Jackson, and the Acadia on North A Street. These are managed by Thomas A. Howell. The Grande is to close in 1989. For a time it was then used as an evangelical church. It was purchased by Bill Debrooke in 1995. In its projection room still exist two old, top-of-the-line Brenkert Enarc projectors. Also still there in 2007 are metal cases holding old, decaying Spanish-language films. One family involved for 36 years in exhibiting these Spanish language films in Valley theaters was that of Elizabeth Valadez and her children, Andy Lopez and Viola Garza.

The telephone directory for 1945 has the first listing for the Valley Drive In Theatre at 1 M. W. State Highway. In 1947 the beautiful Valley Drive In Theatre at the very west end of Harrison boasts of having cost $80,000. The 1959-60 directory has its last listing. Forrest D. Martin its resident partner is noted to be retired in 1961. After it closed the projection booth stood for a long time near the present-day Valle Vista Mall.

1948  In this year the Azteca Theater owned by Santos G. Garcia and with Mrs. Frances Canas as co-owner-manager opens at 424-26 South F Street to show Spanish language movies. Mr. Garcia had built the building in 1941 and had used part of it as a cafe. In 1966 after sale to Ruben Benevides it is renamed Olmo's Theater. It is gone after 1971.

10/29/61  Dr. George Gallaher receives approval for the $18,000 drive-in movie complex at 2620 S. HWY 77. When the Seventy Seven Sunshine Strip Drive In opens the following year. Dave Ayoub, Al Roiz, and Challis Davis are listed as partners, but Dr. Gallaher will eventually operate it by himself. Its entrance is on 77 Sunshine, a short distance south of the present Luby's Cafeteria (south corner of Camelot Drive), behind which the screen stood until it was taken down in the 1990s. It featured a large concession stand along with a playground for children. The films exhibited were family features in contrast to the Citrus Drive In just down the road over the Harlingen/San Benito line. The latter in its final years sometimes showed what are now x-rated films but reserved weekends for family fare. The Seventy Seven 77 Sunshine was to close in 1983 or 84.

In the year 1957 the economy of the American film industry plummeted to critical lows. It took until 1963-64 for domestic exhibition to stabilize and begin evolving into the structural configuration it displays today. In 1963 AMC Entertainment, Inc. introduced the first multi-screen theater. These theaters would eventually feature scattered schedules, larger seats, stadium style seating, and sophisticated sound systems.

In mid-year 1970 Mr. and Mrs. Weiner take over the ownership of the Rialto Theater. When he dies in 1985 his wife Doreen continues to operate it. The Rialto closed its doors in 1992 or 1993. With the removal of its seats, it was then transformed into an events center.

9/23/62  Robert Edward "Mike" Gilbert, who has been a manager for Interstate Theatres, is appointed Harlingen Postmaster to replace acting PM Arthur Purdy, in that position since 11/30/61. Gilbert will also be acting postmaster, until 6/64 when he is made permanent. Gilbert will serve until 1982 when he is followed by Mary Martinez. Born in Linn, MO he moved here from Electra, TX in 1920 just in time to enter the first grade. In 1930 he was an usher for Interstate Theatres and by 1938 becomes the manager of the Rialto and Strand. In the US Army in World War II he goes to OCS in December 1942 and is discharged in 1946. In 1947 he will form company B of the National Guard in Harlingen.
Again with Interstate he becomes the city manager of the Arcadia, Rialto, Grande Theaters and the Rio in Mercedes. Gilbert is involved in numerous civic organizations such as the scouts, Lions, Rotary, and SPTA. He married Virginia Runyon, daughter of famed Valley photographer Robert Runyon of Brownsville, converted to Catholicism, and had two daughters. During the Reagan administration he died after a heart attack on July 21, 1982. He left behind his wife and daughters, Madeleine Broke Gilbert Spangler and Michele Virginia "Ginger" Gilbert La Tronico Liening.

When Gilbert became postmaster in 1962, Clay Fluker became city manager of the theaters.

In 1974 a high-ranking ABC-Paramount manager, Henry Plitt, purchased the northern tier of this old chain circuit which he renamed the Plitt Theatres. The Plitt chain later became part of the Cineplex Odeon Corp. In 1986 Universal Studios Inc. purchased 49% of Cineplex Odion. Thus began the reversal of the trend that started in the early 1950s. Motion picture production companies were now moving back into the exhibition business.

1978 This year United Artists Theatre Circuit Inc. opens a dual theater setup at 216 Ed Carey Drive near the expressway. In 1985-86 its name was changed to Commerce Cinema Twin as the Plitt chain had taken it over in 1984-85 along with the rest of the UA theaters in the Valley. In 1987 the Cinemark chain acquired it. In 1994-95 it was listed as the Dollar Commerce Twin. By January 1999 it had closed its doors.

United Artists was formed in 1919 by a partnership of Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, and D. W. Griffith. The partner's goals were to better control their own work as well as their futures. In 1926 Fairbanks, Pickford and Sam Goldwyn formed a company, United Artists Theatres, that created a nationwide chain. In 2002 it still operated 1,600 screens in 222 theaters.

In 1941 some of the same individuals noted above formed the Society of Independent Motion Picture Producers. It sought an end to monopolistic practices by the five major studios. In 1942 it filed an antitrust suit against a Paramount subsidiary theater, and this eventually led to the 1948 Supreme Court ruling.

1980 is the year of the first telephone listing for Plitt Southern Theatres Cinema Triple at 606 Morgan Blvd. This complex was constructed on Redelco property. It will last be listed in 2001-02 then is transformed into a call center in 2002.

By February 1984 the Plitt Cinema has opened Cinema Three at the Valley Vista Mall. As noted the local theaters in the Plitt chain are to be bought out by Cinemark in 1987. By 2007 Cinemark, Inc. with headquarters in Plano, Texas is the third largest movie exhibitor in the U. S., having 4,430 screens in 37 states and 14 countries. Before November 1994 the Valley Vista venue becomes the Valley Vista Dollar Cinema Three. It is to close before January 1999.

Cinemark's Harlingen Movies 10 at the Sun Valley Mall opened in September 1992. After 1999 it would feature less popular or second run features.

It is Cinemark's new 16 screen theater was erected in 1999 at 401 S. Expressway 77/83 that gets the first-run and most popular movies. The multi-million dollar structure Cinema 16 opened in December 1999. It is one of the finest of all Cinemark's theaters with very attractive metal art elements in its façade and polished stone entrance walls. It features digital sound and the seating for its 16 screens ranges from 129 to 278.

Standard movies (i.e. those of 1 1/2 hour length) still are delivered to the theater in a container having three reels. These are rewound and spliced onto a "platter" of about three
foot diameter. This feeds the film continuously into the projector from which it again passes onto a second platter where it is rewound in the proper sequence. This automation coupled with the staggered schedule for the running of each picture show allows one projectionist to operate the 16 projectors along a lengthy corridor-like room. An alarm system alerts the projectionist to any problems arising at a particular projector.

Manager Pat Brady is the local manager. He comes from a family with a long history of involvement with motion picture exhibition. His grandfather Ed Brady was a pioneer of movie theaters in Brownsville, and his father Tom ran the two theaters in San Benito plus the Citrus Drive In and even for a time the Seventy Seven Sunshine Drive In. The food concessions at the Cinemark still feature the crowd favorite, buttered popcorn, but offer much more in the way of choice of consumables. Adjacent to the lobby there is even a dining area where pizza and other favorites are available.

In 2009 Cinemark added the screening of live Metropolitan Opera Company performances to attract opera fans.

On September 17, 2004 Downtown Harlingen and the City recognized historic cinema in Harlingen by unveiling a giant mural. Located on the east wall of the former Rialto Theater at 101 W. Jackson Street, the mural was executed by artist Angel Hernandez. It is titled on its upper side as the "Golden Age of Hollywood and Mexican Cinema in Harlingen". The mural depicts mid-20th Century Harlingen movie theaters, movie stars and movie posters. Theaters recognized are the Rialto, Strand, Acadia, and Grande. Poster depictions show Charlie Chaplin in "The Kid" and Roy Rogers in "Utah". Theater marquees advertise "Gone with the Wind" and "Los Tres Garcia". Because some Hollywood stars of the past have trademarked their images, portraits of various movie characters are painted in the mural in a somewhat generic style.

American made films continue to entertain the nation and indeed the world. The trend has been to shorten the exhibition period of films so they can be sold in DVDs and VHS formats. Pay-for-TV movies are also coming into their own. While a likely evolution may be the purchase of film showings via the internet, people seem to enjoy experiencing the excitement of films jointly. If so, the cinema has a lot of life left in it.