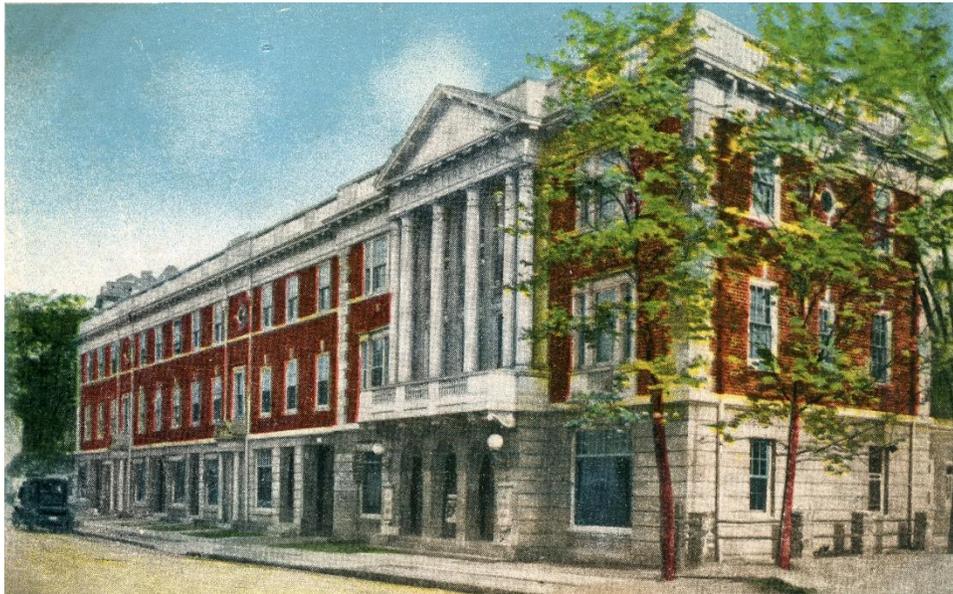


Going to the Movies in Bronxville:
The Picture House and the Bronxville Theatre
By Raymond Geselbracht

The Picture House, opened in October 1916, was Bronxville's first movie theater; the Bronxville Theatre, opened in September 1926, was the second. These are the village's only two movie theaters. The two theater buildings still exist; they are right next to one another on Kraft Avenue. The entrances to the two theaters are only about forty feet apart.



Brick Row, with the neo-classic columns and pediment of the Picture House soaring up the building's three-story façade. The entrance was through the arcade beneath the columns.

The Picture House was at the southern end of a new commercial and residential building, built by the William Van Duzer Lawrence family business, called Brick Row. It was a fine looking structure, with an architectural sophistication typical of Lawrence buildings from Bronxville's early years. The entrance to the Picture House was through an arcade that supported six neo-classical columns and a pediment that climbed dramatically up the building's three story façade. The theater's name was inscribed in large Roman letters under the pediment—THE PICTVRE HOVSE.

The refinement evident in the Picture House's entrance carried on into the theater's interior as well. There were no movie posters anywhere, only photographs of movie scenes and stars displayed on easels. Posters were suspect as probably vulgar; a local critic called them "horrid screamers" that defaced the doorways and lobbies of every theater in America—except those of the Picture House. The management of the

Picture House also pledged to avoid vaudeville acts and show only high quality movies. "The theatre will be devoted exclusively to the exhibition of photoplays of the finest type," management assured its patrons. "Only the work of artists of recognized ability and charm will be presented." Commercial advertisements were also forbidden.



The Picture House's schedule for its first week, October 23-28, 1916. A different movie is featured each night, together with several short films and newsreels, a cartoon, and a travelogue.

There were three showings a day, six days a week (Sundays excluded). Programs included movies, newsreels, travelogues, cartoons, and educational films. From three to six different movies were featured each week. Admission to afternoon shows was ten cents; evening prices were from fifteen to twenty-five cents for seats in the main part of the theater and seats in the boxes were forty cents.

The theater featured large rafters under a peaked roof, two large doors at both the front and rear of the room. The sides had doors as well, and windows glazed with green panes. There were about four hundred and fifty seats, at least some of which—maybe in the boxes—were wicker chairs. All along the front of the stage, potted geraniums were placed where footlights would have been in a theater that presented live performances. The well-planned interior, with its many exits and fireproof construction, according to management, "reaches the acme of safety to patrons."

The Picture House opened to a full house on Saturday evening, October 21, 1916. The feature that night was *The Thoroughbred*, starring Frank Keenan. Large audiences came the following week to see such films as *The Habit of Happiness* with Douglas Fairbanks, *The Mummy and the Humming Bird* with Charles Cherry, and *Neptune's Daughter* with Annette Kellerman.

Management indicated that village organizations would not be allowed to use the theater. They quickly changed their mind about this, though. Perhaps World War I, which spawned many organizations with important messages regarding national defense to impart, was partly responsible. Before long organizations such as the Loyal League, the National Woman's Service League, the Red Cross and groups involved in the Liberty Loan drives were holding meetings and giving patriotic talks at the Picture House. Other organizations came too. A long series of Christian Science lectures began at the end of 1916; explorer and Bronxville resident Roy Chapman Andrews presented lectures about his discoveries in Asia; Bronxville School students came to listen to a lecture about the importance of thrift; Robert Cushman Murphy from the American Museum of Natural History gave two lectures about his voyages to the Antarctic; the "Armenian tragedy" following World War I was discussed in a meeting of the Near East Relief meeting; the Woodcraft League of America gave a program that drew five hundred children; and, beginning in 1920, the Leonard Morange American Legion Post held part of its annual Memorial Day ceremony at the Picture House. Bronxville's movie theater had by the early 1920s become an important venue for village civic organizations and for educational presentations.

THE PICTURE HOUSE BRONXVILLE - - PHONE 1200		
MATINEE DAILY EXCEPT SUNDAYS, at 3:15 P. M. Feature Picture Starts at 4	ALWAYS WORTH WHILE	EVENINGS, 7 to 10:30 P. M. Feature Picture Starts, 7:30 and 9:20
Monday, January 23rd ALICE BRADY "HUSH MONEY" "Hurricane Hutch 4" -A Rolin Comedy	Thursday and Friday, January 26 and 27th LILLIAN GISH- -RICHARD BARTHELMESS In D. W. Griffith's 12 reel masterpiece "WAY DOWN EAST" Note: Owing to length Feature Starts at 3:15—7 and 9 P. M.	
Tuesday and Wednesday, January 24th and 25th -RUDOLPH VALENTINO AGNES AYRES- "THE SHEIK" A CHRISTIE COMEDY PATHE NEWS	Saturday, January 28th BEBE DANIELS In an original story by Elmer Harris "THE SPEED GIRL"	

Advertisement from the Bronxville Review, January 21, 1922. The Picture House at this time was offering from three to six different feature movies during its six-day week.

Most people, though, went to the Picture House for vicariously experienced thrills and intimacies, mysterious encounters, intrigues, and wild rides of different sorts. A *Bronxville Review* columnist saw how vicarious experience could affect people

during a visit to the Picture House. He was sitting near two elderly women. The movie, a melodrama had reached a climactic moment. The villainess had stolen an important document, but she protested that she was innocent. "I didn't do it—I didn't—I didn't," she cried. "At this point," reported the columnist, "the voice of one of the elderly women, vibrant with indignation, rang out, 'You did too you hussy' she said, 'I saw you do it.'"

The Picture House had a doorman who greeted people as they arrived. For years he was John McGuire, called "Pop" by many people who thought of him as a friend who helped give the Picture House a homey neighborhood feel. Every day he greeted patrons and, simply by his benign presence, assured them they had come to, as a reporter for the *Bronxville Press* described the Picture House, a "scene of quiet recreation, where villagers gathered to take their ease in wicker chairs while a piano tinkled in a distant corner and the shadows of the great screen stars flickered across the screen for their amusement." All of this was part of what would before long be called "Old Bronxville," a place that once existed but was doomed and fated to become something bygone that people looked back on nostalgically.

The Picture House was a great success. It satisfied a need that people maybe didn't know existed until the theater opened and they got used to seeing movies there. It was so popular and there was so strong a demand in Bronxville for good movies that it wasn't long before there was talk of building a larger theater in the village. In October 1921, the *Bronxville Review* reported that a thousand-seat theater was being planned for the corner of Palmer and Front (Parkway) Avenues. Nothing came of this, but the Picture House was threatened almost from its opening day by the powerful growth trend in Bronxville that continued through the 1920s.

On March 27, 1925, the *Bronxville Press* carried a story on its front page that was full of portent for the Picture House. The headline read, "Kraft Ave. School Plot Resold; Owner to Erect Stores and Theatre." The Board of Education had put the old Bronxville School property up for sale. It was a large parcel, just north of Park Place, with a frontage on both Pondfield Road and Kraft Avenue of about 150 feet. After some complex real estate dealings and a special Village election, the land fronting on Kraft Avenue was bought by a developer who said he was going to put up a building that would include stores, apartments, and a movie theater.

The Picture House, Bronxville's first and only movie theater for the past ten years, was going to have some serious competition. Not everyone in Bronxville was entirely happy about this. "I regret," a Village trustee lamented, "that the Village has grown to a point where another picture house must come in to compete with the present one...for I...have a real affection for the Picture House and sincerely hope it will retain its present character...but, after all, competition is wholesome and if the demand did not exist, the second [theater] would never be built."



Lower Kraft Avenue, c. 1930, showing Brick Row on the left and the Bronxville Theatre and Business Building on the right. The Picture House, with the arcade and columns, and the Bronxville Theatre, with the awning and Spanish mission style roof parapet, are right next to one another, just left of center.

The Bronxville Theatre and Business Building, as it was called on the architect's plans, was a yellow-brick building with Spanish colonial ornamentation, particularly notable on the entrance façade of the Bronxville Theatre, at the north end of the building. The street-facing part of the building acted as a curtain wall, largely hiding the immense auditorium part of the building from public view.

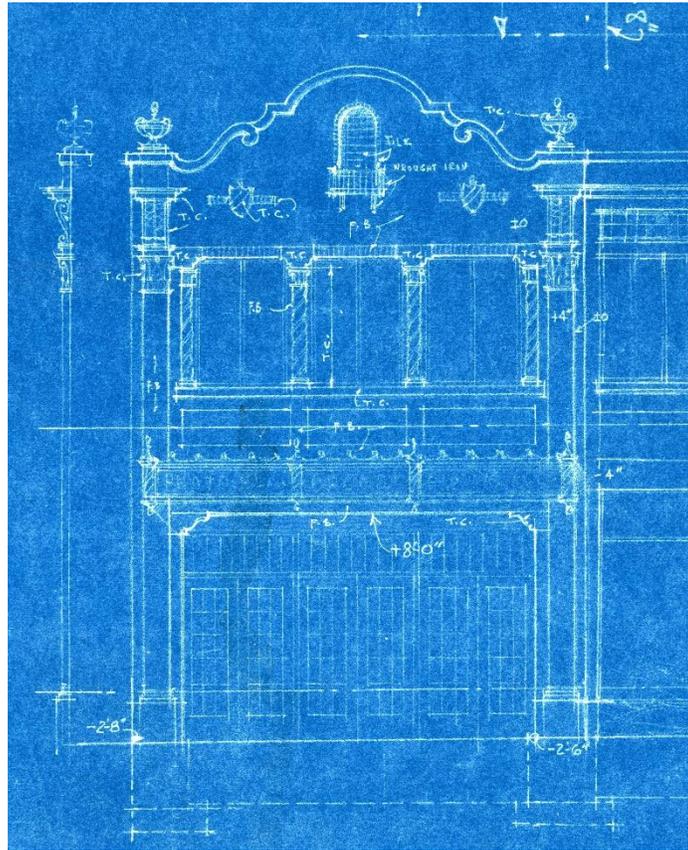


This photograph shows the theater sign and awning of the Bronxville Theatre prior to its 1960 remodeling. Bronxville School students are setting up a scrap metal collection table, c. 1942.

Opening Day at the new Bronxville Theatre was on September 1, 1926, at eight in the evening. A special police detail had been brought in to direct the heavy traffic. A crowd began gathering outside the flag-festooned theater at about seven o'clock, and it soon filled the sidewalk and spilled into the street. "...It looked as though all of the village had turned out to be present at the opening of the new photo play house on Kraft Avenue," the *Bronxville Review* reported. Every one of the theater's 1,200 seats was quickly taken and about 500 people had to be turned away. Inside people

discovered an oak-paneled lobby with a Gothic fireplace and, in the rear of the lobby, a parlor for women and smoking room for men. People filed into the auditorium and took their seats. The entertainment began with a performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner” on the theater’s \$35,000 German-made organ. A nature film was shown, and some newsreels and comedies, and then came the feature, *Nell Gwyn*, starring Dorothy Gish.

Architect’s rendering of the entrance to the Bronxville Theatre, 1926, showing its Spanish colonial ornamentation. Courtesy Building Department, Village of Bronxville.



For a few months, Bronxville had two movie theaters—the Picture House and the Bronxville Theatre, uneasy neighbors, crowded up one against the other and fighting for patrons. Some in Bronxville must have wondered whether the village could support two movie theaters.

On Monday morning, January 24, 1927, notices appeared on bulletin boards outside the Picture House announcing that it was closed indefinitely for repairs and alterations. “The closing of the theatre came without the slightest warning,” the *Bronxville Press* reported. Up until almost the moment the closure notices appeared the Picture House had been advertising its coming attractions, and people came to the theater that Monday, expecting to see a movie. But the Picture House was gone for good. “...This little amusement place,” the *Bronxville Review* recalled, seemed when it opened to bring “a radical departure from the quiet habits of the Village,” but it gradually became a welcoming place which brought villagers together in a new

community of movie goers. One had to feel “regret on sentimental grounds” for the passing of the village’s first movie theater.

The new Bronxville Theatre faced a number of serious challenges during its first several years. A few months after it opened the first talking picture, *The Jazz Singer*, was released. The theater continued showing only silent films for some time, but in early 1929, it surrendered to the public’s demand for the new talking pictures and installed sound equipment. Not everyone was pleased at the change. “There is” the *Bronxville Review* noted, “...a very discriminating section [of society] that used to relish, in the old-time picture house, a spirit of repose and relaxation that was singularly restful. Now, when one enters, one is assailed by a din of raucous voices and unmusical sounds that, instead of being a relief from the outer world of strident affairs, merely accentuates it.”

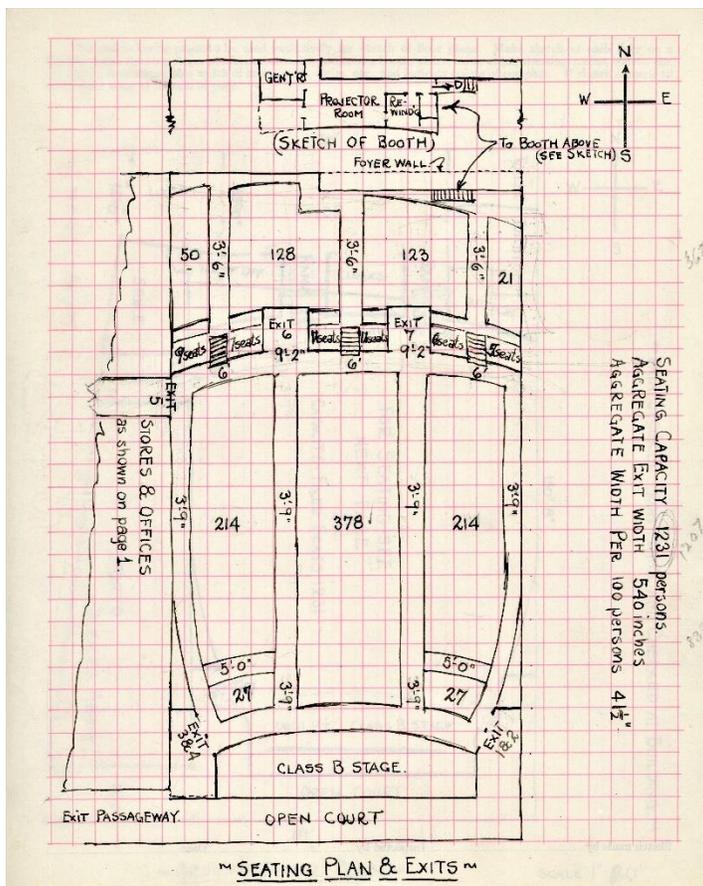


Diagram of the Bronxville Theatre’s 1231-seat auditorium, 1935. Courtesy Building Department, Village of Bronxville.

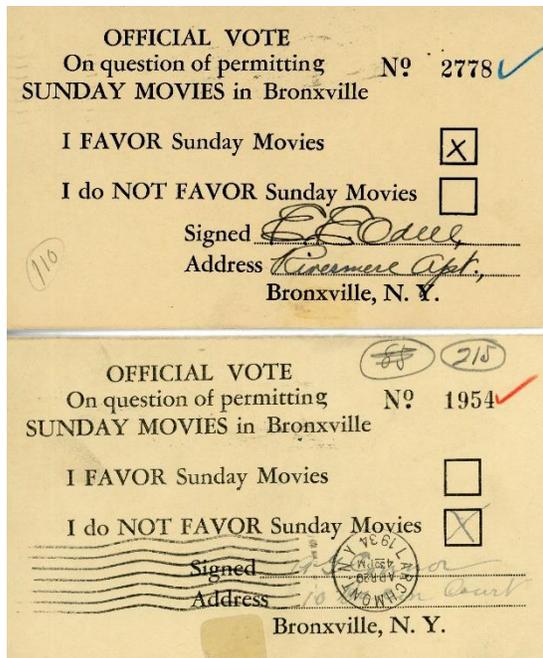
Another challenge for the Bronxville Theatre came from the recently founded Bronxville Women’s Club, which sought to monitor and control the theater’s programming, especially that for children. The club felt the films shown at the theater were not always of high quality. Theater management worked cordially with the club, and the movies shown seemed to get better. When the theater began programming children’s matinees on Saturdays, the club asked that the names of all the feature movies it proposed to show at these matinees be submitted to the club’s Film

Committee, which acted as a censorship board. The club didn't censor adult movies in the same way, but its Civics Committee did review all the movies shown at the theater and published their reviews in the newspapers. The club also formed an Advisory Film Committee, composed of representatives of village organizations, to watch over the Bronxville Theatre's movie choices.

The greatest challenge facing the Bronxville Theatre in its early years arose from its wish to show movies on Sunday. It first made application to Bronxville to be allowed to show movies on Sunday in June 1927; the Bronxville Board of Trustees promptly rejected the request. "It is to be hoped," the *Bronxville Review* editorialized, "if the owners of the Bronxville Theatre value the good-will of Bronxville people, that they will give unqualified assurance of conforming to local standards and adopt a policy which leaves no doubt as to their attitude." Bronxville's "local standards," in the *Review's* opinion, required that Sunday should remain a quiet, restful day.

After waiting a few years, the theater tried again to find an opening into Sunday programming. This time it requested permission only to give concerts featuring eminent performers and highbrow music on Sunday during the winter months. It promised that no movies would be shown. The Board of Trustees rejected the application, one of the trustees commenting, "We do not wish Bronxville to be known as an amusement center."

The issue came to a climax in 1934. The owners of the Bronxville Theatre, citing the high taxes the village levied on them, continued to press the Board of Trustees to allow them to show movies on Sunday, and every time the issue was publically discussed, people came forward to argue that showing movies on Sunday would spoil something restful and sacred about the day. In January, about three hundred parents and teachers came together in the Bronxville School auditorium to talk the matter over. No one spoke in favor of Sunday movies. One person, apparently expressing an opinion held by many others, said that Sunday movies "would bring noise and confusion to Bronxville on Sunday, and would mean a loss of the quiet dignified atmosphere we have had here since the Village was founded." Two weeks later, the *Bronxville Review* carried a page of letters to the editor which carried on the discussion. Frank Ross Chambers, a village founder who had lived in Bronxville for forty-five years, spoke out strongly against Sunday movies. He believed showing movies on Sunday would threaten the village's ability to "keep its character as a home center for people of culture and refinement...." He was not afraid of appearing snobbish, or of making the village appear snobbish. "...Why not, in [this] one respect, remain exclusive?" he asked. Another letter writer, H. Bertram Lewis, warned that "cheapening influences of various kinds seem to be at work in Bronxville and unless these are checked soon the place will be unrecognizable...."



Postcards recording votes cast in the 1934 referendum regarding the showing of movies in Bronxville on Sunday. The village voted in favor of Sunday movies by a vote of 1,068 to 818.

In the midst of this contentious discussion, the Bronxville Theatre in April 1934 again petitioned the village to be allowed to show movies on Sunday. The Board of Trustees decided that the theater, under village supervision, should run a referendum to determine how villagers felt about the Sunday movies question. Postcards were sent to all the registered voters in the village. People were to check one of two boxes, either “I FAVOR Sunday movies” or “I do NOT FAVOR Sunday movies”. 1,886 postcards were returned in time for the official counting in July. The count showed 1,068 voting yes, and 818 voting no.

Movies were shown on Sunday in Bronxville for the first time on July 22. Moviegoers at the Bronxville Theatre were treated to *Men in White*, with Clark Gable and Myrna Loy, and a Laurel and Hardy comedy as well. The theater, to soften what to some villagers was a disturbing change in village life, gave all the proceeds from its shows the next Sunday, July 29, to the Boy Scouts.

Like the Picture House, the Bronxville Theatre became something of a community center for Bronxville, offering a venue for programs and activities involving village civic, charitable and religious organizations, and sometimes village businesses too. The Bronxville Women’s Club signed a contract for three programs at the Bronxville Theatre before it had even opened, and the club returned to the theater again and again with programs sponsored by its various educational departments. The Bronxville Christian Science Church sponsored a lengthy series of lectures at the theater, extending over many years. The Bronxville Engine and Hose Company, the Concordia Collegiate Institute, the Eastchester Neighborhood Association, the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts, the Bronxville Parent-Teacher Association—all of these, as well as other village organizations, sponsored programs and activities at the theater.

The League for Service's many fund-raising programs for the March of Dimes are especially notable.

World War II gave rise to many activities at Bronxville Theatre—fundraising for the Red Cross and the United Service Organizations, the sale of War Bonds, the collection of books for soldiers and of waste paper and scrap metal. During the Korean War, the theater sponsored a free “talking letter” program which allowed family members of servicemen and women to tape record letters and send them wherever their loved ones were serving.

The theater occasionally put on special live programs for children, featuring animals, and well-known children's performers. The advertising for one of these programs announced that “four trained ponies, a bucking mule, a monkey, and trained puppies are coming to the Bronxville Theatre next Wednesday....” There was also an annual Christmas party for children and a birthday club which let children in to see a movie for free on their birthday and gave them chits for free ice cream.



Children at the Bronxville Theatre, each with a toy for their admission to the show, November 1951.

Much of this special activity in the Bronxville Theatre came to an end when the stage was removed in 1960. The theater's lobby, though, remained a place where money could be raised, toys and other items could be collected, and demonstrations could be given. It was also frequently used as a gallery where the work of Bronxville's artists and photographers were displayed.

In May 1959, a fire seriously damaged the Bronxville Theatre's lobby and balcony, and it closed down for over a year. The owner decided not just to repair the damage, but to undertake an extensive renovation which included a radical redesign of the theater's entrance, a complete redecoration of the interior spaces, and an overhaul of the projection and sound systems. The ornamental features of the original entrance were removed, windows were bricked up, and the resulting flat, rectangular façade was covered over with synthetic limestone and stucco. A marquee, topped with a sleek, stainless steel, non-neon “BRONXVILLE,” was added that projected out over the sidewalk. The austere modern entrance no longer seemed part of the Bronxville Theatre building and stood apparently alone as a strangely incoherent modernistic presence between the Brick Row building on its left, and the remnant of the original Spanish colonial façade of the Bronxville Theatre building on its right.



The new auditorium: The old fashioned chandeliers, the decorative wallpaper, and other traces of a bygone elegance are gone. The emphasis now is on functionality, comfort, and increased personal space. Seating capacity is reduced to 880 people.

Management arranged what was called a “Gala Opening” for the renovated theater. It took place on July 22, 1960. A large crowd of people lined up both ways down Kraft Avenue that evening, pressing to get in. Searchlights swept the sky, celebrities arrived and were welcomed at the door as photographers snapped pictures. Radio station WVOX broadcast news of all that was happening. Shortly after 6:30, the mayor of Bronxville and the head of the theater company cut a ceremonial ribbon, officially reopening the Bronxville Theatre.

This opening night advertisement describes some of the features of the “the New Air-conditioned Bronxville Theatre”: wall-to-wall Todd AO screen, six channel stereo sound, luxury easy chairs that give “undistorted viewing pleasure from every location,” and electronically controlled air-conditioning.

Westchester's Newest and Most Luxurious Theatre

THE NEW AIR-CONDITIONED
Bronxville
THEATRE

80 Kraft Ave., Bronxville,
Opp. Railroad Station
Woodbine 1-4030

OPENS FRIDAY, JULY 22nd.

GALA INVITATIONAL PREMIERE
Thursday Evening, July 21st
A SALUTE TO THE FORTHCOMING
'NIGHT OF SPORT'

The perfected film process that gives you — the audience — a sense of participation: The breathtaking clarity of the wall-to-wall TODD AO screen, and the six channel stereo sound, provides a feeling of presence in every scene.

Designed to provide the ultimate in viewing comfort with the newest technical improvements in screen and sound.

Modern as Tomorrow! Tastefully designed and luxuriously furnished... the showplace of Westchester.

New electronically-controlled air-conditioning keeps temperature and humidity at ideal levels.

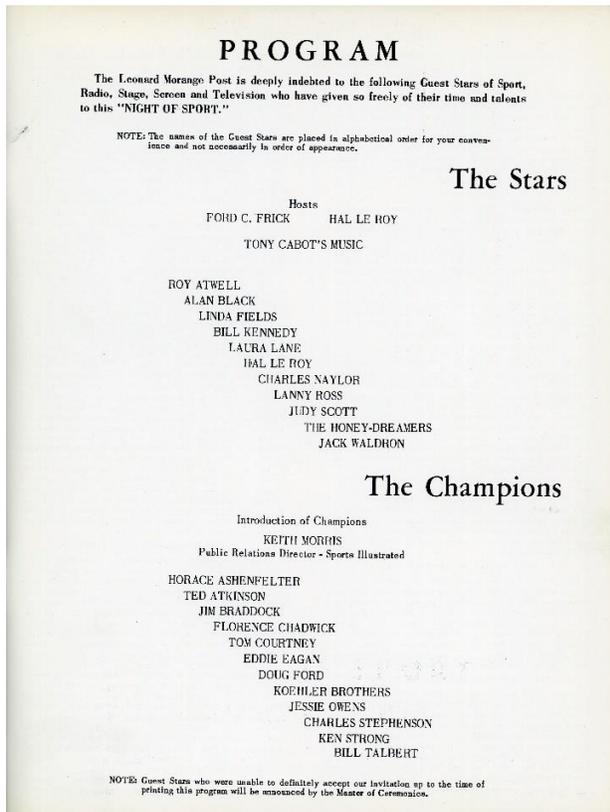
New luxury easy chairs are spaced to provide maximum comfort and undistorted viewing pleasure from every location.

The six-track stereophonic sound, coupled with surround speakers throughout the theatre provide the finest Hi-Fi sound reproduction.

ALL THE GLAMOUR OF AN OPENING NIGHT!
TWO BANDS — KLEIG LIGHTS — CELEBRITIES
Festivities Start At 8 P.M.

People filed in and took their seats. Veterans from the Leonard Morange American Legion post marched in with the colors and the post band played the “Star-Spangled Banner.” A minister from the Reformed Church blessed the renovated theater. Ford Frick, Commissioner of Baseball and a longtime Bronxville resident,

announced that this opening night was a salute to an upcoming “Night of Sport” program, a reprise of a fabulously successful series of extravaganzas which took place in Bronxville in the 1930s. After a few more introductions and announcements, the featured movie began. It was *Windjammer*, the only movie ever filmed using the widescreen “Cinemiracle” process. It was the perfect film to show off the theater’s big screen and new projection equipment.



Just over two months later, on September 30, the Night of Sport event that Ford Frick had promoted on reopening night took place. Like its glamorous predecessors of the 1930s, this 1960 Night of Sport featured a large cast of stage, screen, and radio stars and famous sports champions. As in the 1930s, Ford Frick recruited many of the sports figures and famed songwriter Ray Henderson recruited many of the celebrities, particularly those with musical talents. The *Bronxville Review Press and Reporter* called the 1960 show “one of the most gigantic charity events ever staged in Bronxville.” It drew about 800 people, almost filling the theater, and succeeded in raising \$5,000 toward the building of a new wing for Lawrence Hospital. Some,

at least, of the great excitement that marked the great shows of the 1930s filled the Bronxville Theatre during this new Night of Sport.

Changing trends in movie going in the years that followed the Bronxville Theatre’s redesign in 1960 did not favor theaters that had only one large auditorium. The huge auditorium that was the Bronxville Theatre’s greatest glory when it opened in 1926 had to be given up. The theater closed for construction in 1980 and reopened later in the year with three auditoriums, each seating between 200 and 300 people.

The Bronxville Theatre has survived many changes in the movie world for almost a hundred years, but it was nearly lost in the Covid pandemic that started in 2020. The company which owned and managed the theater when the pandemic shutdown began in March 2020 decided after about a year of closure not to reopen it. In early 2022, the Picture House Regional Film Center of nearby Pelham decided to take over the Bronxville Theatre as a second Picture House location. The Picture House

name, after an absence of almost ninety years, had come back to Bronxville, and the Bronxville Theatre continued its long tenure as the village's only movie theater.