

Forward, into the Past

From Silent Films to Live Theater

by Marion M. Dumond

Former Town of Wawarsing Historian
and Ellenville Public Library Director (Retired)

More than eighty years ago, a group of Ellenville businessmen formed the *Shurter Theatre Company* to erect a theatre which would match or exceed any in the surrounding area. The group included Silas S. and Henry J. Shurter, John Spadaro, William Soffer, and Judge William D. Cunningham.

They purchased part of Thomas J. McMullen's building on **Canal Street** (McMullen retained his gift shop and the ice cream parlor so popular with Ellenville residents) and the large rear lot. They planned to open the theatre on July 3, 1920. With no name for the enterprise, the owners held a contest for a suitable name, offering a prize of \$25. The judges were people of great stature in the area: artist George Inness of Cragmoor; Mrs. Olive Saar (later the wife of Frank Seaman) of *Yama Farms*; and merchant Silas A. VanWagener. George J. Hoornebeck, a local grocer, and ten-year-old Francis H. Lathrop (in later years president of the *Ellenville Savings Bank*) each suggested "**Shadowland**," and each received \$25.

The theatre company announced in the June 7, 1920, *Ellenville Journal* that ticket prices for movies would be 11 cents for children and 17 cents for adults, for the Wednesday and Saturday matinees; evening price would be 17 cents for all. Admission prices varied through the years and depending on the combination of films and additional entertainment. A local resident recently spoke about paying a nickel as a child in the 1930s.

The announcement promised "unobstructed vision throughout the house, with the most comfortable, full leather seats; the entire equipment are the very best that can be procured, and everything about the theatre will correspond to the refined, high-class grade of photo-plays which will be offered." Thus, did the tradition of being described as a "classic art deco theatre" begin for the **Shadowland**.

The July 3rd opening set the basic pattern for each performance: two reels of motion pictures ("shorts"), live entertainment, including comedy, dance, and/or vaudeville acts which might be by area residents, and a feature film. Gladys Silverman (later Miller) of Ellenville was described as being "graceful and pretty in a Spanish dance" at the opening. *Don't Ever Marry* was the feature film.

Only a year later, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Horton, well-respected stock company professional actors, appeared for



one-evening-only in two comedy playlets, complementing the feature film (Ethel Clayton in *The Young Mrs. Winthrop*) and a Mutt & Jeff cartoon. Mrs. Horton had been born Rachel McCausland of the Town of Wawarsing. This was the first joint professional appearance of the couple in Ellenville "where they have a wide circle of friends and acquaintances." Two performances were given that evening, alternating the playlets, and the admission was 55 cents, including war tax.

John Spadaro and Isaac W. Millard of the *Mitchell House* purchased the **Shadowland** from the *Shurter Theatre Company* in November 1920. *The Ellenville Press* commented, "They are already arranging to advertise more extensively and to keep the public informed ahead of coming productions, which is a good thing in itself and will not fail to profit the company and give greater satisfaction to the public."

Until 1930, the famous Sunday "Blue Laws" prohibited public entertainment such as movies on Sundays. The Village Board of Trustees signed a local resolution "permitting the exhibition of motion pictures after two o'clock in the afternoon of the first day of the week" on June 25, 1930, opening the **Shadowland** to daily operation.

John Spadaro had become the sole proprietor of the **Shadowland** only three years after the opening and the theatre provided inexpensive, popular entertainment until a disastrous fire in November 1937. Spadaro immediately began renovation and the theatre reopened on December 24, 1937, still incomplete, but boasting a balcony that would seat 300 people. It was "standing room only" at the ceremonial ↗





grand reopening in February 1938, testimony to the popularity of the Shadowland.


The Spadaro family name remained synonymous with “*Shadowland*” for just over 50 years, with all family members working in the theatre in one capacity or another until they closed the business in 1974. Ed and Marlene Jacobs of Greenfield Park purchased the building in 1980 and operated it as a movie theater until 1984. They sold it to *Cooperative Artists, Inc.*, a group of New York City professional artists. Under the direction of Ron Marquette, *Cooperative Artists* converted *Shadowland* into a playhouse, a “legitimate theater.” Although Mr. and Mrs. Jacobs later signed the building over to the theater company, forgiving a \$70,000 mortgage, the company was unable to survive financially.

A new nonprofit group was formed in 1987 with a community Board of Directors, continuing Marquette as Artistic Director. Marquette left at the end of the 1994 season to take on similar duties at the *Ulster Performing Arts Center* in Kingston and was succeeded by Bill Lebach until July 2000. The current Producing Artistic Director is William V. Morris.

Shadowland is now known throughout the area for its quality upscale theater productions. Each artistic director has left his own unique mark on the development of legitimate theater in the Ellenville-Wawarsing area. Finances are shaky at times, but the community believes in the theater’s value to the area. A combination of grants, corporate support, auctions, loans, innovative ticket packaging, and performance sponsorship, paired with community pride, has kept alive what the November 25, 1920, *Ellenville Press* called “the most popular place of entertainment ever conducted in this village.” And so it is in 2003.



(By the way, the spelling of “theatre/theater” in this article follows the practice of the times. *Shadowland* at its birth was a theatre (and, as a name, still is); after about the middle of the twentieth century, popular use chose theater more frequently. Either is correct, although theater has become the preferred generic spelling in the US, while theatre is still favored in Britain.)

For more information about the *Shadowland Theatre*, visit the local history collection of the **Ellenville Public Library & Museum, 40 Center St.**, which has a wealth of newspaper clippings, programs, and pictures. Just for fun, borrow the video copy of *Ellenville on Parade*, the late 1930s promotional film of Ellenville people and businesses created to be shown at the *Shadowland* and preserved through a New York State Council for the Arts grant awarded to the Library. For still more fun, make sure that summer 2003 includes attending at least one performance at the *Shadowland*. 



Editor's Note: All photos and artifacts courtesy the Ellenville Public Library & Museum's extensive collection, which also furnished articles and artifacts Mrs. Dumond used in her research. Unfortunately, many of these photos had no dates on them. Using digital enhancement, after they were scanned into the computer, it was possible to blow up the images enough to pull partial clues from the movie posters in two of the above pictures! The Internet Movie Database (and sleuthing) filled in the missing pieces of the puzzle. (Opposite page, bottom) The McMullen Building, approx. 100 years ago, based on the clothing and the building details. (Opposite page, top) A program from August 1923, though the movie had a Sept. 1922 release date. Did it take that long to reach here? (Top left) The poster for "Virtuous Liars" (released May 1924) suggests a 1924 or 1925 date for the photo. (Lower left) This one was easy! A release date of July 1936 for the film suggests this photo was taken before the Nov. 1937 fire. (Above) Thirty minutes of staring and the name Melvyn Douglas jumped out! The word lengths matched "I'll Take Romance" in Douglas's filmography; and co-star Grace Moore matched the other fuzzy name! The film was released just after the November 1937 fire, which suggests a 1938 showing after the Grand Reopening!

Ed & Al's Barber Shop, Inc.



123 Canal Street
Ellenville, New York 12428
845-647-9684