

The Independent Exhibitor's Pal

Localizing, Specializing, and Expanding the Exhibitor Paper

A few blocks north of Union Station and just a few blocks south of the heart of downtown Kansas City, Missouri, sits a cluster of small brick buildings known as Film Row (fig. 15). In the early 1920s, the nearly twenty buildings in Film Row were constructed to be single-use and low to the ground, just in case of a fire. Their occupants, besides the flammable nitrate reels and stacks of posters and promotional materials, were the men and women who managed film exchanges. Some exchanges were states' rights distributors—a form of distribution in which a company acquired the exclusive rights to rent a film or group of films to theaters in a particular region, sometimes limited to a single state though generally a bit larger (e.g., Kansas and Missouri). Other exchanges were part of national distribution networks. Paramount, Pathé, and a growing number of other national distributors needed a means of contracting with exhibitors, controlling print circulation, and collecting rental revenue. Local exchanges provided the vital, if costly, nodes of this distribution infrastructure. Whereas Kansas City's film exchanges had previously leased space in downtown offices, the Film Row development of the early 1920s marked a big step forward—both for protecting public safety and creating an industrial hub where buyers and sellers, competitors and collaborators all came together.

Ben Shlyen came of age in this rapidly changing ecosystem. In 1916 or 1917, Standard Film Co., a Kansas City states' rights outfit, hired Shlyen as a high school student to help with shipping, then promoted him to writing advertising literature when the copywriter on staff went to fight in World War I. Shlyen developed an intimate understanding for Kansas City's exchanges and the theaters they served, and he saw that there might be an opportunity for a young go-getter like himself. In 1919, at the age of eighteen, Shlyen pitched his idea for a regional film trade paper to local exchanges and prominent exhibitors. In January 1920, Shlyen

FIGURE 15. A street view of Kansas City's Film Row district, which grew in the 1920s and was later captured in this photograph from 1946. Courtesy of Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library, Kansas City, Missouri.



published the first issue of the *Reel Journal*, a mere four pages long.¹ The paper grew during the 1920s, nearly in parallel to the developing Film Row district (where Shlyen had his office), and it ultimately expanded well beyond Kansas City to become the most widely read exhibitor trade paper of all time: *Boxoffice*. In January 1920, though, Shlyen was just another young entrepreneur attracted by the potential to connect buyers and sellers, the low barrier to entry of publishing a newsletter, and, perhaps on some level, the allure of motion pictures.

This chapter explores alternatives to the national film trade papers that developed from the mid-1910s through the early 1920s. As *Moving Picture World*, *Motion Picture News*, and *Exhibitor's Trade Review* continued printing and squabbling in New York City, numerous localized and specialized exhibitor publications sprouted up in places such as Philadelphia and Minneapolis, in addition to Kansas City. These regional papers began by serving specific business needs; however, the most successful ones expanded and endured because of their ability to speak to communities of exhibitors and, in some cases, negotiate with major industry players behind the scenes.

To appreciate both the similarities and differences of these localized publications, this chapter is organized across three sections and utilizes both a survey and case study approach. The first section surveys regional exhibitor papers, including *Reel Journal*, that essentially attached themselves to nearby distribution networks and exchange offices. Looking at several different publications is a necessity in this case; our access to the early issues of these journals is largely limited to scattered issues here and there. The second section profiles a different type of specialized exhibitor paper. Founded in Philadelphia in 1919, *Harrison's Reports* issued weekly reviews to exhibitors that were “free from the influence of film advertising.” P. S. Harrison's fiery editorial page, which called attention to the plight of independent

exhibitors, also offers a useful prism into understanding how the major developments in the US film industry in the early 1920s were understood and interpreted by the exhibitor community. Third and finally, this chapter explores the early history of Martin J. Quigley's *Exhibitors Herald*, which began as a regional trade paper in Chicago and grew into a paper of national stature and circulation.

Before analyzing any of these publications, though, we need to briefly examine the business environment facing exhibitors, particularly exhibitors operating low-capacity theaters in small or midsized towns. These were the readers that regional trade papers, *Harrison's Reports*, and *Exhibitors Herald* claimed to serve and, sometimes, did.

CHANGES IN FILM DISTRIBUTION AND EXHIBITION, 1919 TO 1923

As small exhibitors gained more reading options than ever before in the late 1910s, their overall leverage within the industry was eroding. Small exhibitors faced interrelated pressures from competing theaters, higher film rental costs, and conditions mandated by distributors. In larger and midsized cities, for example, theaters that had succeeded during the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) era—those generally seating two hundred to four hundred patrons and changing programs of short films daily—found it more difficult to compete against the bigger and better theaters, seating one thousand people or more, that were being built just blocks away. Features cost exhibitors more to rent than programs of short films, and the audience turned over more slowly.² Small theaters could sell fewer tickets than large theaters in a given day but still had to pay high rental costs (that is, if they could obtain the desirable feature films at all). In 1919, for example, the small Empress Theatre in Toledo, Ohio, was pushed out of business by four nearby competing theaters that offered more desirable films and the amenities that audiences increasingly expected theaters to provide.³ The larger theaters often charged more for tickets, but they did not necessarily have to charge a lot more because their higher seating capacities could translate into greater overall revenue.

Not all small exhibitors, though, found themselves competing against shiny new theaters. Hundreds of small towns across the US were serviced by a single screen (fig. 16). These exhibitors still had competition, arriving in the form of baseball games, bad weather, the traveling circus, and other local events or circumstances. Additionally, the market power they gained from possessing a movie monopoly in a town of two thousand people was very limited. Distributors wanted to waste as little time as possible negotiating with them. Small exhibitors operated on an entirely different tier within the industry than the large urban exhibitors and chains that in the late 1910s bound together to form First National and the United Picture Theaters of America. Although these consortiums promoted the idea that they would give exhibitors the types of films they wanted and at a better price, the reality is that they were controlled by powerful exhibitors and/or get-rich-quick

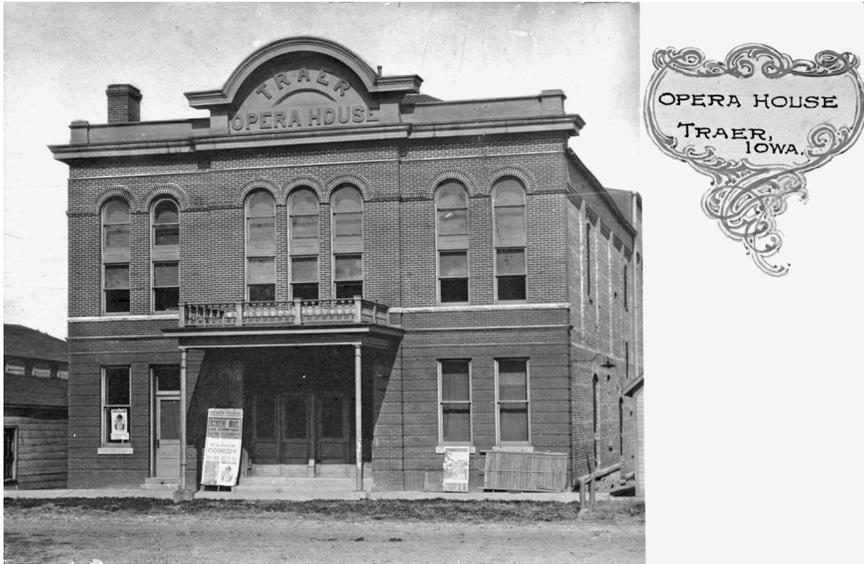


FIGURE 16. View of the Opera House in Traer, Iowa, which had a population of 1,329 in 1920. The Traer Opera House typified the sort of small-town, independent theater that regional exhibitor papers claimed to represent. Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

opportunists. When these consortiums approached small-town exhibitors, it was not for their advice about what type of film to produce or acquire; it was for their money. In some cases, the solicitations arrived not for the films themselves but for dodgy shares of stock that would confer some preferred status for booking.⁴

From the perspective of the larger distributors—especially the distributors with production capabilities, such as Paramount, Metro, and Pathé—the goal was to maximize the industry’s gross revenue and, more important, the share of that revenue that went back into their pockets. In the mid to late 1920s, the pursuit of this goal would lead the major producer-distributors toward a frenzied spree of theater buying. But, in the late 1910s and early 1920s, the movement of producer-distributors into exhibition was still quite modest. Just consider Paramount, generally cited as the leader of Hollywood’s vertically integrated model. From 1918 to 1924, Paramount used Wall Street financing to acquire ownership stakes in fifty-one theaters and grow its total consolidated assets to \$49,018,000. In the following six years (1925 to 1931), however, Paramount partially or fully acquired ownership in 762 theaters and grew its total assets to \$306,269,000.⁵ At the dawn of the 1920s, exhibitor trade organizations were nervously anticipating the incursion of distributors into theater ownership, and many independent exhibitors loudly protested.⁶ But the reality of this taking major effect was still a few years away.

Instead, the more immediate battles that exhibitors were fighting against the producer-distributors in 1920 were the conditions and policies that the latter group

were implementing to make their businesses more profitable and predictable. After experimenting with the “open booking” of features on a one-off basis in the late 1910s, Paramount and the other major producer-distributors largely returned to the practice of block booking—compelling exhibitors to enter into contracts for entire slates of films.⁷ For the producer-distributors, block booking mitigated the financial risk associated with any single picture and lowered the transaction costs of selling those pictures. For independent exhibitors, however, block booking took away their ability to select only the pictures they wanted and to negotiate over specific price points. Rather than refusing outright to enter into block booking contracts, a different pattern emerged—exhibitors signed contracts, then refused to follow through on their stipulated terms. Some exhibitors strategically over-booked film programs in order to deprive their competitors of access to product. In other cases, exhibitors ignored their contracts because they did not think their patrons would like a film, or they realized they could substitute a different film at a better price. In 1920 and 1921, more than a third of all movies contracted for in the US were never shown or paid for.⁸ Some exhibitors used the reviews they read in *Harrison's Reports* as their guides to decide which movies to keep and which to ditch. The block booking practices and forceful negotiation tactics of Paramount led independent exhibitors and their trade organizations to complain to the FTC about unfair competition. In 1921, the FTC began what would become a six-year investigation and, ultimately, unsuccessful legal case against the studio.⁹

The studios, for their part, argued that exhibitors were themselves to blame for many of the policies that they did not like. One of the few archival collections left by an independent exhibitor of this era offers a striking portrait both of exhibitor malfeasance and of a bitter and hateful person. Thomas Watson owned the Superba Theater in Freeport, Illinois. In the early 1920s, he found himself in competition with a larger theater in his same town and the subject of complaints from Chicago-based film exchanges.¹⁰ Watson routinely booked pictures that he never played (his papers are rich in notices asking him why he had not scheduled a film's play-date yet).¹¹ He would also book films at a certain price, then complain about the films' quality and demand either a lower rental fee or threaten to pay nothing at all.¹² Most egregiously of all from the distributors' perspective, he engaged in the illegal business of subrenting (or “bicycling”) films to exhibitors in nearby towns. Watson received repeated complaints from exchanges, many of which he ignored. In other cases, he wrote back defiant and sometimes racist letters, referring to exchange operators with an anti-Semitic slur.¹³ Watson's racist beliefs and activities appear to have run deep. His archival collections include Ku Klux Klan memorabilia—a point that requires calling out in order to resist the tendency to view the Thomas Watsons of the industry as noble underdogs fighting against the giant studios, and, more broadly, to remind us that some local exhibitors participated in their communities through hate, exclusions, and support of violence against Black and Jewish people as much as they did through welcoming and inclusive behaviors.¹⁴

To more efficiently deal with exhibitors like Watson, national distributors and their trade organization, the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry (NAMPI), encouraged exchanges across the country to create FILM Clubs (the acronym stood for Film Industry Local Managers). The FILM Clubs participated in the city planning of film row developments and engaged in public outreach activities—arranging special screenings for war veterans, for example, or organizing an athletic field day.¹⁵ The FILM Clubs’ most important function, however, was to monitor and discipline unruly exhibitors. Like a group of landlords gathering together to compare notes about bad tenants, FILM Clubs could blacklist exhibitors from renting films.¹⁶ More important, FILM Clubs implemented arbitration systems, which represented a much cheaper and more efficient tactic for handling disputes than filing lawsuits.¹⁷ Thomas Watson behaved badly toward the exchanges, in part, because he knew he could get away with it. He was sued on only a few occasions; most distributors did not bother to sue him to claim the \$20 or \$30 rental fee they were owed. Additionally, there was enough competition among exchanges—including the many states’ rights distributors operating in the early 1920s—that he kept receiving sales calls about booking films even when some Chicago exchanges were furious with him. In 1922, Chicago’s FILM Club became the Board of Trade, which comprised half of exchanges, half of exhibitors, and existed primarily to arbitrate disputes initiated by the exchanges.

When the leading producer-distributors formed the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA) and appointed Will Hays as its chairman in January 1922, the new trade group inherited and improved on the arbitration systems already in place with FILM Clubs and Boards of Trade.¹⁸ One of the MPPDA’s first major accomplishments came in the drafting of the standard exhibition contract in 1923. The MPPDA’s creation has been frequently discussed in film histories as a response to the 1921 scandals involving Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle and William Desmond Taylor. But as Richard Maltby has argued, based on his close examination and digital curation of the MPPDA’s papers, the organization was also designed to address “the extreme contractual instability of the film industry.”¹⁹ The standard exhibition contract streamlined both the sales process for exchanges and the arbitration process when particular deals went bad.

In this context of mutual animosity, exhibitors found a coterie of new publications pitched to them. Some of these publications tried to soften industry tensions; others were eager to amplify them. All of them offered exhibitors a guide of sorts for interpreting the changing motion picture industry and their roles within it.

REGIONAL TRADE PUBLICATIONS

By the time Ben Shlyen’s *Reel Journal* celebrated its first birthday in 1921, it was one of at least twenty regional trade publications serving the exhibitors of an exchange territory. Table 1 provides a list of all the regional trade papers that we know,

TABLE 1. Regional Exhibitor Trade Papers, 1921

Title	City of Publication	Circulation	Frequency	AFP Member?
<i>New England Exhibitor</i>	Boston, MA	1,271	Weekly	Yes
<i>Motion Picture Journal</i>	New York, NY	1,600	Semi-monthly	Yes
<i>The Exhibitor</i>	Philadelphia, PA	1,200	Semi-monthly (later changed to weekly)	Yes
<i>Canadian Moving Picture Digest</i>	Toronto, Canada	2,000	unknown	Yes
<i>Moving Picture Bulletin</i>	Pittsburgh, PA	1,600	Weekly	Yes
<i>Interstate Film News</i>	Cleveland, OH	1,600	Weekly	Yes
<i>Michigan Film Review</i>	Detroit, MI	1,000	unknown	Yes
<i>Reel Facts</i>	Cincinnati, OH	1,500	Weekly	Yes
<i>Weekly Film Review</i>	Atlanta, GA	1,212	Weekly	Yes
<i>Southern Picture News</i>	Atlanta, GA	unknown	Weekly	No
<i>Exhibitors Herald</i>	Chicago, IL	8,000	Weekly	No
<i>Amusements</i>	Minneapolis, MN	3,127	Weekly	Yes
<i>Reel Journal</i>	Kansas City, MO	2,000	Weekly	Yes
<i>Movie Age</i>	Omaha, NE	unknown	unknown	No
<i>Motion Picture Journal</i>	Dallas, TX	1,500	Weekly	Yes
<i>Oklahoma Film News</i>	Oklahoma City, OK	unknown	Weekly	No
<i>Rocky Mountain Screen News</i>	Denver, CO	1,000	Semi-monthly	Yes
<i>Motion Picture Weekly*</i>	Los Angeles, CA	unknown	unknown	No
<i>Motion Picture Bulletin</i>	Los Angeles, CA	700	Weekly	Yes
<i>Pacific Coast Independent Exhibitor*</i>	San Francisco, CA	unknown	Unknown	No

SOURCES: "The Fourteen Points of Successful Advertising" [Advertisement for Associated Film Press], *Moving Picture World*, May 14, 1921, 178, https://lantern.mediahist.org/catalog/movpicwor501movi_0238; *N. W. Ayer & Son's American Newspaper Annual and Directory*, Library of Congress Digital Collections, <https://lccn.loc.gov/sn91012092>.

NOTE: Papers are listed geographically from East to West.

* Indicates a degree of uncertainty regarding whether the trade paper was operating in 1921; these may have gone out of business by then or may have not yet officially started.

with a degree of confidence, existed in 1921. Some of these publications existed for a very short time. More regional papers were introduced later, and there were probably some others in 1921 that we just don't know about. Still, this table provides a snapshot of the exchange cities (ordered geographically, east to west) that supported these publications and the circulation of readers (nearly all of whom were exhibitors) that these papers reached. A snapshot taken just three years earlier, in 1918, would have looked very different, probably featuring only three

publications: Minneapolis's *Amusements* (est. 1914), Philadelphia's *The Exhibitor* (founded in 1917 or 1918), and Chicago's *Exhibitors Herald* (est. 1915, but, as detailed below, moved beyond the Chicago exchange market by 1918).

What explains the dramatic increase of regional trade papers over the period from the end of World War I to 1921? One answer is that entrepreneurial publishers identified a promising market with a low barrier to entry. The first two decades of the twentieth century witnessed the diffusion of inexpensive and user-friendly duplication technologies, which were marketed especially to businesses for internal communications. These developments pressured printers to lower the rates they charged clients and created new possibilities for self-publishing newsletters in small batches.²⁰ "It is frequently said, facetiously, that anybody with a typewriter and four weeks' credit can start a trade paper in the motion picture business," quipped the general manager of a leading paper more than a decade later.²¹ After inexpensive regional trade papers proved successful in Minneapolis, Chicago, and Philadelphia, the model caught on elsewhere.

The growth of states' rights feature film distribution during and after World War I was also crucial in building an advertising base for local publishers. The *Reel Journal* and other regional papers depended on ad revenue from businesses that needed to target their message to a narrower audience than the readership of *Motion Picture News* and the other national trade papers. The theater seating supplier in Cincinnati and the states' rights distributor that controlled the Texas and Louisiana rights to a group of feature films could both spend their advertising dollars more efficiently by placing ads in papers that reached only exhibitors in their areas. The regional trade papers also sought the patronage of the national distributors with exchanges in their cities (for example, the Metro exchange located within Kansas City's Film Row). But not all of the national distributors permitted their local exchanges to buy ads; the advertising budgets were controlled by the New York home offices. As a result, states' rights distributors were the best customers of the regional trade papers in the late 1910s and early 1920s.

In addition to the states' rights marketplace, regional trade papers glommed onto exhibitor trade organizations. During the Lee Ochs scandals of the late 1910s, the national exhibitor organizations were a dysfunctional mess. The situation improved around 1920 as Sydney S. Cohen led the formation of the Motion Picture Theater Owners Association (MPTOA).²² But local exhibitor organizations, like the Miami Valley Exhibitors' League, still offered the potential for a cohesive community that was absent on the national level. Although it could be difficult to get competing exhibitors to cooperate, the common threats they faced—particularly in terms of state censorship laws and increasing film rental prices—could bind them together.²³ Although it's always dangerous as a historian to label anything as the "first," the *N. W. Ayer & Son's Newspaper Annual and Directory*, along with multiple accounts from trade papers, suggest that the earliest regional exhibitor paper hails from Minnesota. In 1914, Minneapolis exchange operator Tom Hamlin

founded *Amusements: The Motion Picture Exhibitors Weekly Trade Journal*.²⁴ The sole issue of this trade paper's early run that I have been able to locate was published on August 10, 1916, and contained approximately six pages of news and editorial content and ten pages of advertising—half of which was taken out by states' rights distributors based in Minneapolis.²⁵ Beyond simply providing a medium for local exchanges to advertise, however, *Amusements* shared reports from the Northwest Exhibitors' Association and attempted to build a sense of community among the local exchange managers and exhibitors. One of its initiatives in this regard was organizing a golf tournament for local exchange managers and exhibitors, a practice that Omaha's *Movie Age* would later implement as well.²⁶ The golf tournaments and other local film industry events suggest that regional trade papers attempted to play a role in mediating and repairing frictions between exhibitors and exchanges.

Other early regionals to emerge, both in 1915, were *Exhibitors Herald* and *Canadian Moving Picture Digest*. Despite Canada's national autonomy and its massive size geographically, the *Canadian Moving Picture Digest* had a readership size and business model (based in the exchange city of Toronto) that was comparable to regional papers such as *Amusements* and *Reel Journal*. Additionally, the US film industry conceived of its "domestic" film market as including Canada—a categorization that persists in the reporting of box-office grosses today. Nevertheless, *Canadian Moving Picture Digest* had a unique editorial voice that distinguished it from other regionals and insisted on Canada's separateness. From 1918 to 1954, Ray Lewis served as *Canadian Moving Picture Digest's* editor. Ray Lewis was a woman, and she endured a great deal of misogyny and belittlement from her male peers (including *Variety's* Sime Silverman, who called her "the girl friend in Canada").²⁷ As Jessica L. Whitehead, Louis Pelletier, and Paul S. Moore argue in their excellent book chapter on Lewis, she was highly effective at "commanding her editorial pulpit to become a leading opinion maker in Canadian distribution and exhibition."²⁸ Even though her paper depended on the advertising of US companies, she was not afraid to bite the hand, serving as a "tireless advocate for making the Canadian film industry independent from the United States."²⁹

After *Amusements*, *Exhibitors Herald*, and *Canadian Moving Picture Digest*, the next regional exhibitor paper noted in the *N. W. Ayer & Son's* directory is *The Exhibitor* (fig. 17), which David Barrist began publishing in Philadelphia either in 1917 (according to *Ayer*) or 1918 (according to a self-congratulatory issue of *The Exhibitor* published in 1939).³⁰ As table 1 illustrates, no fewer than fourteen additional trade papers, including *Reel Journal*, sprouted up in important exchange cities between 1919 and 1922. Some cities and territories even had competing regional papers. Atlanta, for example, was a hub for film distribution across seven southern states: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. For at least a couple of years, two regional trade papers based in Atlanta claimed to serve exhibitors across those states—Nat L. Royster's *Southern*

Picture News (founded in 1920) and Anna Eugene Aiken's *Weekly Film Review* (which was most likely established that same year). Similarly, Art Meyer's *Motion Picture Bulletin* and Cecil A. James's *Motion Picture Weekly* claimed to represent the exhibitors of California and Arizona.

In 1920, Tom Hamlin attempted to bring both greater organization and profitability to the growing number of "regionals," as they became known within the industry. Hamlin had left Minneapolis and *Amusements* around 1918 to move to New York City and take a job reviewing films for the elite national trade paper *Motion Picture News*. But in 1920, he left *Motion Picture News* to found a new regional paper, *Motion Picture Journal*, which sought to appeal to the exchanges and exhibitors of New York and Northern New Jersey.³¹ The decision to start a new publication in a market already oversaturated by trade papers might seem odd, but Hamlin planned to leverage *Motion Picture Journal* toward the larger and more lucrative business of running an advertising agency. In 1920, he persuaded eleven other regional papers, including his former Twin Cities sheet, *Amusements*, into becoming clients of the Associated Film Press (AFP).³² Much like the agencies that represented local newspapers and, later, broadcasting stations, Hamlin's Associated Film Press leveraged its proximity to the headquarters of the major film corporations in New York to try to persuade those companies to buy ads in some or all of the regional papers.³³ When Metro or Pathé placed an ad in Cleveland's *Interstate Film News* or Denver's *Rocky Mountain Screen News* through Hamlin, his office took a fee. To streamline operations, Hamlin mandated that all AFP member papers conform to the same publishing size: nine inches by twelve. The same ad could easily be placed in anywhere between one to a dozen papers.

Regional papers seemed to welcome the arrangement with Hamlin and Associated Film Press. It is easy to understand why. The regional papers were successful at selling ads to states' rights distributors and local equipment suppliers. But when it came to the major film corporations, it was the New York City distribution headquarters, not the local exchanges, that controlled large advertising budgets. Hamlin funneled advertising revenue to the regionals from New York, while the papers could continue selling ads to their more reliable base of local customers. Hamlin's client list grew over the following years, reaching eighteen trade papers in January 1923. Yet focusing on total numbers alone does not capture the rapid churn within the marketplace. Regionals ceased publication or left AFP nearly as quickly as they sprouted up. For example, three of AFP's twelve clients in December 1920—*Allied Amusements Bulletin* (Chicago), *Screencraft* (New Orleans), and *Southern Picture News* (Atlanta)—were no longer being promoted to advertisers just a few months later. The May 1921 list of clients shows a net increase of two (fourteen regionals, by that point), but the fact that five new papers were added and three departed over such a short period suggests that the low entry and exit barriers of regional publishing led to a revolving door of players.³⁴

The most successful regional trade papers—the ones that had the most staying power—were led by dedicated editors who fostered the sense of a local community. These editors, like *Reel Journal's* Ben Shlyen and *The Exhibitor's* David



FIGURE 17. Philadelphia's regional exhibitor paper, *The Exhibitor*: "An Intimate Journal of Local Film Facts." Source: *The Exhibitor*, Oct. 15, 1920, https://lantern.mediahist.org/catalog/exhibitoroctoberoexhi_0001.

Barrist, actively participated in their local film rows and avoided, as much as possible, the perception that they preferred certain exhibitors or exchanges over others. Through their editorial pages, the events they hosted, news coverage of local theater openings and exhibitor meetings, and advertisements listing local exchange staffers by name, the regional trade papers sought to construct a sense of

the local film industry as a coherent community. The papers acknowledged exhibitor grievances but maintained an optimistic vision of industry cooperation and community. If everyone in the local industry could just come together and play fairly—whether in golf or film rental contracts—then everything would work out okay. When conflicts emerged, these papers and their editors preferred to perceive themselves as mediators rather than partisans for one side or the other (the positions that the New York trade papers occupied during most of the MPPC years and during the Ochs controversy).

The emphasis on community extended into how the regional papers conceived of the role of the movie theater within a small town or neighborhood. “The exhibitor of any community should rank his influence with that of his newspaper editor,” argued *Reel Journal’s* Ben Shlyen, who encouraged theater managers to participate in local civic organizations and perform public service.³⁵ When *The Exhibitor* profiled a new neighborhood theater in Collingswood, New Jersey, the paper noted how the opening ceremony brought together representatives of the Philadelphia film exchanges, some of whom sent flowers in advance, as well as important civic leaders. Collingswood’s mayor addressed the event’s attendees and “was enthusiastic in his promise to give the theatre the support of the community.”³⁶ By calling for greater community engagement and celebrating instances of it, the regional trade papers were following a familiar script. In numerous *Moving Picture World* editorials from 1913 to 1916, W. Stephen Bush had observed that one of the best defenses against adverse censorship and tax policies was for exhibitors to be involved in local governance and positively contribute to their communities. When they served their communities by hosting fundraisers and special screenings for children, in other words, exhibitors were also serving their own best interests and those of the film industry at large.

During the 1920s and beyond, the idealization of the small-town theater and its importance to the community became ingrained in the trade discourse. In his essay “Imagining and Promoting the Small-Town Theater,” Gregory A. Waller identifies different flavors of this discourse. His analysis focuses on the year 1930, but it is quite applicable to the early 1920s as well. Popular magazines, such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, often framed the local picture show as “an inviting, accessible, hometown gathering place run by an enterprising, neighborly showman. Thus understood, the movie theater becomes a site where community was constituted and reaffirmed in the pre-World War II era, a testament to the resilience of the local within a marketplace of commodified mass entertainment.” The trade papers Waller surveyed maintain this ideal, emphasizing the theater’s active civic participation: “the picture show—especially at the small-town theater—works in concert with schools, seeks out the advice of churches and women’s clubs, and vigilantly pays heed to public opinion.”³⁷ Paying heed to local public opinion was often invoked as safety measure against the threat of legally imposed censorship.

These ideals played another important strategic function, too. As the 1920s continued and theater chains acquired thousands of independent theaters and smaller chains, the ideal of the local exhibitor as community leader gave a powerful rhetorical stance to those small-town and neighborhood theater owners who wanted to see more government intervention—not in the form of new censorship laws but in antitrust legislation and unfair competition enforcement.

By and large, the editors of the regional trade papers did not advocate for government intervention into the industry's ownership and trade practices. Yet local conflicts did erupt that challenged the illusion of the exhibitor-exchange community. In one notable example, a Los Angeles-based paper launched its first issue by taking a shot at a powerful local exchange. The cover of *Motion Picture Weekly's* first issue, dated November 1, 1919, featured a portrait of Michael M. Gore, surrounded by hand-drawn shapes and slightly skewed photos of five of his seven Los Angeles theaters. The twenty-page issue included a brief complimentary profile of Gore titled "From Newsboy to Exhibitor," but, more important, it contained a full-page advertisement taken out by the showman in the form of an "open letter to exhibitors, producers, and exchange-men."³⁸ Gore wrote the following:

I feel it my duty to the Motion Picture Industry, with which I have been identified for many years, to relate an unhappy, unjustifiable, unethical, and unjust transaction practiced upon me by WALTER RAND, Branch Manager of UNITED ARTISTS CORPORATION Exchange located at Los Angeles.

I went to the offices of the United Artists Corporation to book the picture "Broken Blossoms" and entered into a contract with WALTER RAND, Branch Manager, to pay the sum of two hundred and twenty-five dollars for the said picture to run at the Casino, Rosebud, and Savoy Theatres on Central Avenue, Los Angeles. WALTER RAND booked me the picture, furnished me with matter which to advertising the picture and accepted my check for \$225.00 payment in advance. The following day I paid to said corporation \$11.25 war tax on said picture.

A few days ago while I was in the office of SELECT PICTURES, booking some pictures, WALTER RAND entered and handed me the two checks I had given in payment for "Broken Blossoms" and the war tax. I said, "What does this mean?" and he replied, "I had the chance to sell the picture for \$25.00 more than you paid so I took more money." I called his attention to the contract he made with me and he said, "Contracts mean nothing to me, I am out to get the most money."

The fact has developed that WALTER RAND, after selling me the picture "Broken Blossoms," obtained an offer of \$25.00 more than I had paid from another exhibitor, and without consulting or informing me, tore up my contract and entered into a new one with the other exhibitor.

ARE CONTRACTS MADE BETWEEN EXCHANGE MEN AND EXHIBITORS
MERE SCRAPS OF PAPER TO BE TORN UP AT THE WILL OF THE EXCHANGE
MEN?

I believe the trend of the Motion Picture Industry is toward a more stable and firmer business foundation than the “policy” pursued by WALTER RAND.

I do not believe WALTER RAND’S above-mentioned conduct is the ethical ideal of business methods entertained by the four great artists comprising the UNITED ARTISTS CORPORATION.

It is unbelievable and unthinkable that the four great artists who are associated in the UNITED ARTISTS CORPORATION sanction, or will EVER endorse or EVER PERMIT, such methods to be used in the sale of their pictures as used by WALTER RAND.

The letter continues for another four paragraphs, hammering WALTER RAND (always in caps) for his lack of integrity.³⁹ Gore sought to publicly shame WALTER RAND and tarnish his reputation both in the exhibitor community and the larger Los Angeles production community. Indeed, by mentioning the four great artists (D. W. Griffith, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, and Charles Chaplin), who had founded United Artists just nine months earlier in 1919, Gore emphasized the chasm between the ideals expressed in their press releases and the realities of business negotiations between exchanges and exhibitors.

After the publication of Gore’s open letter, the Los Angeles Theater Owners’ Association took up the matter, threatening to withhold all future bookings from United Artists until the company fired Rand.⁴⁰ United Artists seems to have essentially called their bluff, keeping Rand on staff and continuing to rent films to exhibitors in Southern California. One year later, United Artists promoted Rand to western district manager, a position that placed him in supervision of the Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and Denver exchanges. As he monitored branch managers, he no doubt kept an eye on rental contracts, making sure his subordinates, like him, got the most money possible.⁴¹

The dispute received only a small amount of coverage in the national trade press, appearing as brief news items in *Wid’s Daily*. But one newsletter made it the topic of a full-page editorial. In a piece entitled “Are Your Film Contracts Just So Many Scraps of Paper?” P. S. Harrison described Gore’s *Motion Picture Weekly* open letter to the subscribers of *Harrison’s Reports*. The story confirmed Harrison’s worldview of how film producer-distributors abused the exhibitor. Harrison concluded the editorial by reiterating the same argument he had been making for months: “This condition will not change until you organize.” He warned they should not organize with the producer-distributors, who seek to further “their own pocket-books, but with men who breathe the same air as you do; who feel the same heartthrobs you do; who fight the same battles you do—EXHIBITORS.”⁴²

FREE OF ADVERTISING INFLUENCE— HARRISON’S REPORTS

Like so many developments in the film industry’s trade press, the origins of *Harrison’s Reports* can be traced back to *Motion Picture News*. In March 1918, *Motion Picture News* announced “a radical step in review service,” offering readers “the

crisp, terse appraisals that you would give to a fellow exhibitor asking your opinion of a picture you had just viewed.”⁴³ *Motion Picture News* already had a lengthy section of film reviews, as well as a recently added department entitled “Exhibitors’ Own Box Office Reports,” which included brief accounts akin to those in *Motography*’s “What the Picture Did for Me” (e.g., “Good show, star not very popular”) but strove for greater comprehensiveness by analyzing how the film performed in different regions. The section offered four columns—East, North, South, West—and listed the film’s performance there as “Poor,” “Average,” “Big,” or “Extra.” Yet both the film reviews and box-office reports had their limitations. Although Johnston did not admit it in his columns, he probably knew that many exhibitors perceived *Motion Picture News*’ reviewers as too soft on the films of his advertisers or, at the very least, out of touch with their immediate business needs. The “Exhibitors’ Own Box Office Reports” department offered the perspectives of exhibitors; however, the perspectives could be inconsistent and inevitably arrived weeks, if not months, after a film’s release. Johnston imagined a new film review section that would deliver “exhibitor to exhibitor reviews” ahead of the films’ release dates and in a clear, consistent, and trusted voice. He also proposed that the section would benefit producers by contributing to the production of higher grossing films. The service “will indicate definitely the kind of pictures wanted and the elements in them which are not wanted.”⁴⁴

The person Johnston selected for the job was Peter S. Harrison, who had entered the film industry in 1907 as an exhibitor in California. At some point, Harrison segued into distribution—operating exchanges that served California and the Pacific Northwest.⁴⁵ But it was his experience as an exhibitor, not an exchange-man, that Harrison continually brought up in his writing over the next four decades. His having been a showman was what gave his reviews their authority.

Motion Picture News promised that Harrison’s reviews would be “based solely on the entertaining qualities of the picture” and written in a “concise, readable manner, shorn of all adjectives and confusing verbiage.”⁴⁶ Yet, from the beginning, Harrison’s taste and writing style never fit neatly within this promised framework. Adjectives abound in his writing (e.g., “a corking good picture”), and Harrison evaluated entertaining qualities based on an implicit hierarchy. He offered his greatest praise to films that had a morally uplifting story, leaving a “lump in your throat” (a favorite expression of his), without being maudlin or overly sad. In one of his first reviews, he lamented that Vitagraph’s *The Desired Woman* (1918) was “an excellent picture—spoiled by the death of a little child,” a plot point that he was sure would send audiences “from the theatre downcast.”⁴⁷ One year later, he criticized D. W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* (1919), the source of Michael Gore’s dispute with United Artists and a film that many critics regarded as a masterpiece, for making spectators feel more “gloomy and depressed” than “an hour and a half spent in a grave yard among skull and cross bones.”⁴⁸

Harrison’s reviewing style stayed quite consistent across *Motion Picture News* and the first few years of *Harrison’s Reports*. His review of *Anne of Green Gables* (1919) is emblematic of his style and the type of films he wanted producers to make:

You owe it to your patrons, as well as to yourself and the profession in general, to show in your theatre pictures of this character. “Ann of Green Gables” is one of the cleanest, sweetest, most human pictures the screen can boast of. It is the personification of all that is pure and simple in life. It is one of those pictures that sink deep. Laughs and tears mingle in the situations, making the spectator sympathise intensely with the joys and sorrows, hopes despairs, pleasures and afflictions of characters.⁴⁹

For Harrison, calling a picture “one of the cleanest” was high praise. Harrison scorned movies that he regarded as prurient, immoral, or likely to offend audiences. “No matter how strong or interesting an attraction may be, unless the entertainment is free from suggestiveness, it is not in keeping with the wants of the great majority of the picture-goers nowadays,” Harrison wrote in a review of William S. Hart’s *Selfish Yates* (1918), which contained a scene that suggests a woman was sexually assaulted.⁵⁰ As Harrison continued to review films month after month, his distaste for films he considered prurient grew into a full-blown critique of the industry: out-of-touch producers made these films, exhibitors were required by contract to show them, and, as a result, audiences stopped frequenting the movies, and reformers proposed censorship regulations.

In July 1919, Harrison left *Motion Picture News* but took his reviewing section with him. He began his first four-page newsletter with the following announcement:

TO ALL EXHIBITORS:

Commencing with this number, HARRISON’S EXHIBITOR REVIEWS, which have appeared in Motion Picture News for the past fifteen months, will be published by the undersigned, independently, under the title HARRISON’S REPORTS. THEY WILL BE MAILED TO THE SUBSCRIBERS EVERY SATURDAY, at the yearly subscription of \$10.00. Film advertising will UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES be accepted, this to remain the permanent policy of the service.”⁵¹

As noted in chapter 1, *Harrison’s Reports* was not the first film review service for exhibitors. B. P. Fineman’s *Exhibitor’s Film Review Service* and the first iteration of *Wid’s* both made a go of this format in 1915. But Harrison quickly differentiated his publication from those earlier efforts and the film industry’s national and regional trade papers. Fineman and Wid Gunning had regarded the limited advertising their reviewing papers received as an unfortunate problem, something that had to be offset by higher subscription prices. Harrison transformed this liability into an asset. He was emphatic that he would never accept advertising, and this meant he was “absolutely under no obligation to anyone except you—the subscribing exhibitor.” Beginning in January 1921 and continuing until its final issue in 1962, the phrase “free from the influence of film advertising” appeared prominently in every issue of *Harrison’s Reports*, just below the title heading.

The circumstances surrounding Harrison’s departure from *Motion Picture News* are unclear. It’s certainly tempting to imagine a dramatic confrontation: Harrison

sits at his desk as William A. Johnston, looking over his shoulder, asks Harrison to soften the tone of his review of the latest Paramount release; Harrison tightens his fist, cracking a pencil in half, and stands up to tell Johnston he's had enough and that he's going to start his own advertising-free film review service. But the little evidence we have suggests a different story, one far more amicable. Harrison went to great lengths in his first newsletter to thank Johnston for "his unfailing courtesy and generous support . . . rendering pleasant a connection that will always be cherished."⁵² Harrison also used *Motion Picture News* to promote his new venture, placing advertisements throughout the summer of 1919. Johnston, for his part, gave Harrison the same courtesy he gave to other advertisers; he even ran a puff piece about his former employee entitled "Harrison Starts Well on Review Project."⁵³ So why did Harrison leave *Motion Picture News*? The most likely explanation involves some combination of desires—to make more money, gain greater recognition, exercise more autonomy, and fill a need within the exhibition community.

The length, style, and point of view of Harrison's reviews remained quite consistent as he transitioned from *Motion Picture News* to his own newsletter. But the context surrounding the reviews changed a great deal. Harrison added an editorial page that gave him a platform to address industry developments beyond the evaluation of specific films. Harrison's editorials, by and large, can be distilled into a three-part structure. First, identify a problem facing exhibitors: a lack of good pictures, rising rental prices, new censorship policies, or even dishonest exchange-men who rip up their contracts. Second, express outrage and lay the blame of the problem squarely at the feet of producers and distributors. And, third, propose greater exhibitor organization as the solution to the problem.⁵⁴ In the case of censorship, for example, Harrison blamed producers, some of whom he called out by name (William Fox, Ivan Abramson, and Lewis Selznick), for creating the "vile sort" of pictures that invited the attention of reformers, who had recently achieved a huge victory in the federal prohibition of alcohol sales. "But you will never succeed in altering this condition unless you organize," wrote Harrison.⁵⁵

As a small-business owner, Harrison faced two practical challenges from which Johnston had sheltered him at *Motion Picture News*. First, and most obviously, he had to persuade exhibitors who only paid \$3.00 per year for *Moving Picture World* or *Motion Picture News* that his service was sufficiently valuable for them to spend an extra \$10.00 per year. Second, he needed to maintain the same level of access to advance screenings of new films that he had previously enjoyed while working for an editor who maintained excellent relationships with most of the industry's key players. The closer he came to solving the first challenge, the more the second one grew as a problem.

These challenges, developments, and conflicts played out in Harrison's editorials, which addressed readers as part of a community, one united with him in a common set of interests. Harrison liked to quote letters and cables from exhibitors to show how a subscription more than paid for itself. In the typical letter, an

exhibitor explains that he was getting ready to book some film for a particular price; then he reads the latest issue of *Harrison's Reports* and realizes that either the film was dreadful or that he was on the brink of overpaying. He thanks Harrison for helping him avoid this costly mistake.⁵⁶

But the exhibitor testimonials intended to justify the cost of subscribing to *Harrison's Reports* also demonstrated why several producer-distributors were keen to keep P. S. Harrison away from reviewing their films. Harrison was bad for their bottom lines. At various points in 1920 and 1921, Metro, Associated Producers, and Vitagraph all banned Harrison from attending their preview screenings.⁵⁷ An outraged Harrison called on his community of exhibitor readers to write letters to the companies and demand they welcome him into the screenings. "Write the letter at once. Let the blow come sledge-hammer like," implored Harrison, who encouraged exhibitors to tell Metro that they were prepared to boycott booking any of the company's new pictures until he was allowed to review them in advance alongside other members of the press.⁵⁸ In all of these cases, Harrison's strategy of having his readers apply pressure to the distributors was successful. The distributors caved and, begrudgingly, began inviting Harrison to press screenings.⁵⁹ Harrison thanked his community of readers for their "loyal support." He was especially touched that the Illinois exhibitors passed a resolution at their convention championing his cause.⁶⁰ Within two years of starting his paper, Harrison had found a way not simply to bring together a community of exhibitors but to harness and direct their anger toward objectives that he felt served both his paper and readers well.

Behind the scenes, however, Harrison's relationship with his exhibitor readers was becoming more conflicted than the vision of community that he publicly projected. In a remarkable two-page editorial entitled "Is the Game Worth the Struggle?," Harrison directed his anger and frustration toward the exhibitor. "Your interests are at stake. Your very existence is threatened," he wrote in April 1921. "You are slowly but surely being forced out of business, by the big interests on the one hand, and by the self-styled reformers on the other. And who is to blame? Yourselves alone! For you will not take effective measures to stave off the impending catastrophe." Harrison's angry editorial grew increasingly desperate as he told exhibitors about his own frustrating experience working with them:

Having frequently rejected all overtures that might in any way hinder me from loyally serving their interests, I placed my faith entirely upon their common sense. I even refrained from accepting film advertising to cover the cost of publication, so as to preserve absolute independence.

But what has been the response?

Nothing less than a disappointment! For near the end of a two-year faithful service, I find myself face to face with the same problems as do the few self-sacrificing workers in the [exhibitor] organization—lack of appreciation and ingratitude. So after the [*sic*] studying the situation over I have come to the conclusion that the exhibitor himself is responsible for whatever may befall him—he is worthy of his fate.

Let each exhibitor judge his own conscience and judge if this is not the unvarnished, though bitter, truth! Who is responsible for the exacting conditions imposed by producer-distributors? Deposits, C.O.D.'s, full payment in advance, F.I.L.M. Clubs, and other such impositions have been due to the unwillingness, or at least to the neglect, of the main body of exhibitors to live up to obligations of business ethics. If pictures are booked [but] are not played, or paid for; if bills are not met at their maturity, and responses to courteous letters are not sent giving a reason for the delay, it is only natural that the creditors should take their measures to protect their interests; and as these measures are applied to all indiscriminately, the good exhibitors are thus made to suffer along with the bad ones.

Take my own case for example: I have on my books today thousands of dollars due on ordered subscriptions and renewals. Some of these exhibitor-debtors have been sent as high as six bills and three courteous letters to remind them that their subscriptions have been long past due; but in the majority of cases no reply has come forth. . . .

Is the yearly subscription too much? In order to put out these REPORTS I work no less than twelve hours out of each twenty-four, seven days a week. I have no Sundays, no Holidays. I work just as hard (harder in fact), as I would for an individual. And my exclusive services could not be acquired for less than ten thousand dollars a year. Is ten dollars for this amount of work too much? If I save an exhibitor from booking a harmful, or worthless picture even once a year, is it not worth the trivial sum this Service costs?

It often looks to me that honesty pays the poorest dividends, indeed. My experience in this work has been extremely disappointing.⁶¹

Harrison's editorial was a rare expression of personal anguish. He harnessed the rage he usually reserved for producers, distributors, and racy pictures and poured it out upon his core constituency. Rather than uniting the exhibitors together as a community through shared victimhood, he bound together exhibitors as the dupes responsible for their own poor state of affairs.

Across the next several issues, Harrison indicated that he was pleased with the editorial's reception. More exhibitors paid him the money they had promised. And they encouraged other exhibitors they knew to become new subscribers and pay their bills promptly. He reprinted a handful of the letters he received, including one from an exhibitor who fully accepted the flogging he had endured. "You are *absolutely right*. We are digging our own graves. . . . For heavens sake, Harrison, don't give up!"⁶² Perhaps encouraged by the outpouring of support, Harrison continued to push forward and turned his editorial cannons back on more familiar targets, the producers and distributors.

In the coming years, Harrison's enemies would give him a nickname: "Pete the Poisoner" or "Poison Pete Harrison." Harrison's reviews could poison the independent exhibitor market for any picture that he panned. And his editorials that denounced the industry's production and distribution practices could be repurposed by moral reformers and legislators, amplifying Harrison's voice beyond the

community of exhibitors. From Harrison's perspective, however, it was the major producer-distributors that were doing the poisoning. Hollywood studios wanted exhibitors "to keep on buying blindly this poisonous product without a chance to protect your patrons from it."⁶³ Harrison was not a poisoner. He saw himself as a toxicologist and watchdog—monitoring the film industry's goods and services, branding the skull and crossbones onto dangerous merchandise, and ringing alarm bells for the good of his public's health.

Over time, Harrison answered the question he had posed in his soul-searching editorial tirade against exhibitors who didn't pay for their subscriptions. He clearly found that the game was worth the struggle. He reviewed more than fifteen thousand more movies in *Harrison's Reports*, carrying on for another forty-one years. He neither accepted advertising nor pulled his punches up through his final issue on September 1, 1962.⁶⁴ He refused to quit, and his readers loved him for it.

Exhibitors Herald

Of all the regional trade papers launched between the mid-1910s and early 1920s, none proved more consequential to the American film industry than *Exhibitors Herald*. But when the paper debuted in the summer of 1915, there was little distinctive or noteworthy about it. Originally titled *Exhibitors Film Exchange*, the paper promoted itself to "exhibitors in the states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, and other states dependent on Chicago exchanges for film service."⁶⁵ *Exhibitors Film Exchange's* founding president and editor, James T. Igoe, was primarily self-interested in what the trade paper meant for his core business: printing. Igoe was one-half of Chicago's Cahill-Igoe Company, and he recognized that a trade paper oriented toward the growing film business would be an asset for his press.⁶⁶ But after only one month, Igoe handed off the official editorial duties. *Exhibitors Film Exchange's* fifth issue listed its new editor on the masthead: Martin J. Quigley.⁶⁷ It was a quiet introduction to a figure who would go on to leave an enormous imprint on the industry.

When Quigley took the helm of *Exhibitors Film Exchange* in August 1915, he was a newcomer to both the film industry and the city of Chicago. He had grown up in Cleveland, Ohio, and pursued his education across a series of Catholic institutions: first, Niagara University in New York State, then Catholic University in Washington, DC, and finally at Dunwoodie Seminary in New York City. Quigley nearly joined the priesthood, according to his son, but a romantic relationship with his future wife dissuaded him from taking the cloth.⁶⁸ Although Quigley did not become a priest, he came away from his training with a deep grasp for how Catholic institutions operated. His ability to speak the language of the church and understand what moved its levers of power became assets for the rest of his career.

In 1910, Quigley took a job at a newspaper in Fremont, Ohio, before moving to work for newspapers in Detroit and, shortly thereafter, in Chicago.⁶⁹ He took over

editing *Exhibitors Film Exchange* as he was in the process of learning about the motion picture industry and, more simply, about the film medium itself. During his first several months of penning the paper's editorial column, Quigley kept his remarks very generic, rarely discussing individual players within the film industry by name. Even after Quigley changed the paper's name to *Exhibitors Herald* in November 1915, his editorial columns remained detached from any analysis of the industry's inner workings. Instead, he chose, for example, to reflect on why "film play" would be a more dignified name for the medium than "movies."⁷⁰ In many ways, Quigley was undergoing the same learning curve that William A. Johnston had completed just two years earlier when he founded *Exhibitors' Times*.

Among the many generic discussions in his columns, however, we can see the emergence of two ideas that would play prominent roles in Quigley's later career. The first was the importance of industry self-regulation and coordination to avoid censorship policies.⁷¹ In making these arguments, Quigley was largely echoing the voices of W. Stephen Bush, William A. Johnston, and, later, P. S. Harrison. Unlike those other figures, however, Quigley would ultimately play a pivotal role in the conception and implementation of Hollywood's self-censorship policy, the Production Code. The second idea—and far more important to the editorial voice and reputation that Quigley cultivated during the late-1910s and 1920s—was the need to deal fairly in business. In only his second month helming the paper, Quigley gently scolded exhibitors who canceled their bookings after entering into contracts and, as a result, drove up rental prices and reduced the film supply for other exhibitors. He asked exhibitors "to be mindful of the golden rule in its business application and deal with exchanges in the manner they would expect to be dealt with."⁷² Quigley's criticisms grew more forceful over the coming years, but he always couched them as coming from a forward-thinking and impartial position, designed to improve the industry overall.

If there was one person who helped Quigley find his voice and dig deeper into analyzing the industry's intricacies, it was Lee A. Ochs. In 1916 and throughout 1917, Quigley came to view the president of the Motion Picture Exhibitors League of America (MPELA) and founder of *Exhibitor's Trade Review* as the embodiment of corruption and a scourge to the film industry. To Quigley, Ochs represented the antithesis of fair dealing—an exhibitor who abused his leadership position for his own personal gain and, in the process, made conditions worse for the rest of the nation's exhibitors. "Every exhibitor who supports Mr. Ochs' paper must realize that he is working for the personal gain of some of the league's officers and against the best interests of the league," warned Quigley in a December 2, 1916, editorial, more than a full month before *Exhibitor's Trade Review* libeled William A. Johnston and attempted to extort Universal for advertising revenue.⁷³ In contrast to Ochs, who saw elected office as a platform to earn more money through his theater business and new trade paper, Quigley presented himself as an independent straight shooter.

The growing tension between the two men exploded in the summer of 1917 when Ochs visited Chicago, Quigley's home turf, for the MPELA convention.⁷⁴ After Ochs won reelection to the MPELA's highest office through dubious means, Quigley accused him of rigging the election and praised the exhibitors who quit the MPELA in protest: "The attempt of Mr. Ochs to dominate the convention exclusively for his own interests resulted in the disruption of the Motion Picture Exhibitors League and Mr. Ochs is now a king without a country," he wrote.⁷⁵ Quigley lamented that 125 exhibitors had made the journey to Chicago for the convention, "the majority of them expecting to learn something that would assist in bettering their business, and partaking in constructive work for the general advancement of the industry."⁷⁶ Exhibitors were denied these services by the MPELA in its summer convention. As the year went on, Quigley reminded exhibitors continually that they would find the honesty, independence, leadership, and community they were looking for in the pages of *Exhibitors Herald*. And while his paper paid particular attention to Chicago and other midwestern markets, Quigley's editorials increasingly spoke to an intended audience of producers, distributors, and exhibitors dispersed across the country.

Exhibitors Herald's acquisition of *Motography* in July 1918 cemented Quigley's leap beyond the status of regional trade paper editor. As we saw in chapter 2, the Chicago-based *Motography* occupied an unusual position among the national trade papers. The name it proposed for the movies—"motography"—had never achieved any staying power, nor had the trade paper's sense of identity. *Motography* changed its format with more frequency than the era's fashions, going from a weekly, to a monthly, to a semimonthly, and finally back to a weekly.⁷⁷ Its intended audience had swerved, too, from being a trade paper for exhibitors to more of a general interest film magazine, and back to being exhibitor-oriented, with its popular section "What the Picture Did for Me," established in October 1916. One thread of continuity across all of these iterations was a shortage of advertising revenue. Whereas *Moving Picture World* and *Motion Picture News* were selling sixty to eighty pages of advertising in most issues they published in the late 1910s, *Motography* seldom sold more than a few pages of ads.⁷⁸ In an apparent cost-cutting move in April 1918, *Motography* stopped publishing any film reviews other than those penned by theater managers for "What the Picture Did for Me."⁷⁹ Two months later, Quigley bought out his Chicago rival and, in July 1918, published the first issue of *Exhibitors Herald and Motography* (the latter part of the title was dropped after a year). It's unclear how much Quigley paid for the publication, but my best guess is that *Motography's* liabilities had come to far exceed its assets. A willingness to take on debt was likely more important to closing the deal than presenting a large cash offer.

What Quigley gained from the acquisition, beyond a drawer full of promissory notes, were subscriptions and stature. *Motography* had been poor in advertising yet rich in circulation. In 1917 and 1918, *Motography* had self-reported a circulation

of 12,500. Even if we accept that this number was probably an exaggeration (no audit was performed to test its veracity), there is no doubt that *Motography's* subscription base was triple (or more) the circulation of *Exhibitors Herald*. Just as important, those subscribers resided in states beyond simply Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Ohio. Quigley had bought himself a national circulation, and, unlike *Motography's* editors, he proved capable at translating those subscriptions into ad dollars.

Whereas *Motography* had perceived its Chicago location as a weakness in the competition for national advertising, *Exhibitors Herald* sought to turn it into a strength. "The geographic advantage of publishing in Chicago enables *Exhibitors Herald and Motography* to reach nearly half of the exhibitors of the United States the day following publication," wrote Quigley shortly after acquiring *Motography*.⁸⁰ Quigley's son has suggested that his father found other ways to capitalize on his location in one of the nation's largest railroad hubs. Because businessmen generally changed trains in Chicago and experienced long layovers during cross-country trips, "it was relatively easy to arrange a lunch date or other time for interviewing a traveling executive." His son has also described how being based out-of-town was "an advantage in making appointments with company heads and advertising chiefs on his frequent trips to New York. Writing or wiring from Chicago in advance, Quigley found the executives were accommodating to the traveler."⁸¹ The clarity of these geographic divisions and the formality of appointment-making also suited Quigley's preferred style of doing business. He simultaneously valued being closely connected while maintaining clear boundaries.

Beyond the practical considerations of being located in Chicago, Quigley embraced the symbolic value of his midwestern location in his appeal to independent exhibitors. Chicago was "the heart of America."⁸² And *Exhibitors Herald* was "The Independent Film Trade Paper" at least in part because it was *not* published in New York City—a hub of greedy film distributors, corrupt exhibitor organization leaders, and smarmy trade paper editors. New York City was out of touch with average American exhibitors, and, when it got in touch, it seemed like it was usually to fleece them. Even the entertainment industry's greatest achievements in New York, like the magnificent Capitol Theatre that opened in 1919 just north of Times Square, inadvertently contributed to the sense of out-of-touchness. The fifty-three-hundred-seat Capitol was located a world away from the concerns of midwestern rural exhibitors, many of whom operated in towns with entire populations that were smaller than that single theater's capacity.⁸³

Quigley launched *Exhibitors Herald's* most important campaign yet to fulfill "its mission as the Independent Trade Paper" during the summer of 1920 when he attacked Paramount's Adolph Zukor for his company's incursions into theater ownership. Across three consecutive issues, Quigley framed the matter at hand in the most dramatic ways possible, outlining Zukor's plans "to shackle the independent exhibitor and producer in the grip of monopoly, reducing them to abject

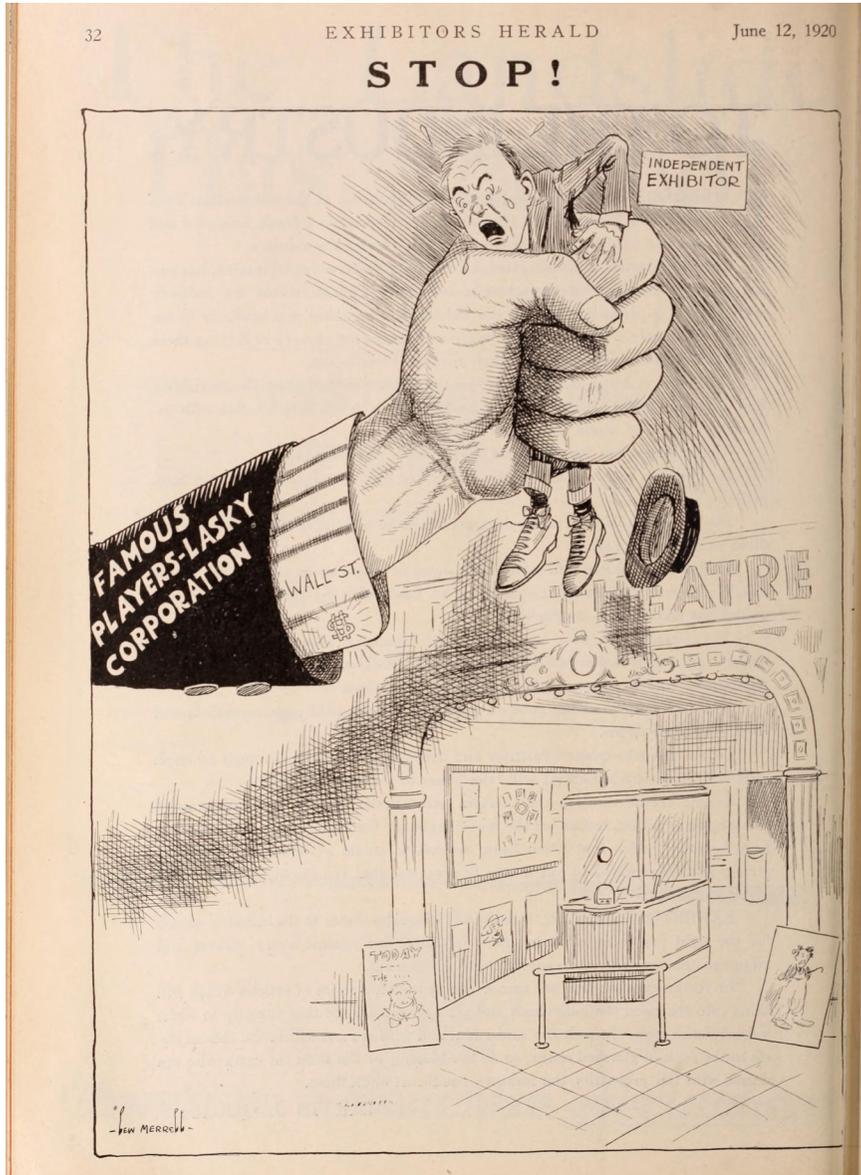


FIGURE 18. “Stop!,” *Exhibitors Herald*, June 12, 1920, 32. https://lantern.mediahist.org/catalog/exhibitorsheraldioexhi_o_1072.

commercial slavery or driving them from the business which is now their means of livelihood.”⁸⁴ Beyond his forceful written critiques, Quigley included political cartoons (which were unusual for the paper) illustrating, for example, the hand of Famous Players–Lasky, adorned in “Wall Street” cufflinks, ripping away an independent exhibitor from his theater (fig. 18). The response of exhibitors was electric.

Quigley had validated their fears and expressed their anger. The Motion Picture Theatre Owners of America passed a resolution at its Cleveland convention that summer, declaring that it “hereby officially express[es] its sincere appreciation to Mr. Quigley for what it justly believes to be the most significant and beneficial act which any trade journal publisher ever has performed in defending the independence of [exhibitors].”⁸⁵ A Nebraska theater owner wrote to Quigley, saying that America’s independent exhibitors “owe you our moral support and encouragement, that your influence in the cause of justice and fairness may be broadened.”⁸⁶ Quigley relished receiving these endorsements from the exhibitor community, and he proudly reprinted them in an effort to distinguish his trade paper from others in the field. In the same issue of *Exhibitors Herald* that reprinted the testimonials, Quigley called out the editors of *Motion Picture News*, *Moving Picture World*, and *Exhibitor’s Trade Review* by name, asking them, “IN THE EXHIBITORS’ FIGHT FOR INDEPENDENCE—WHERE DO YOU STAND?”⁸⁷ The takeaway was clear: Quigley was the only trade paper editor willing to take on Zukor’s Paramount, and the nation’s independent exhibitors should pledge their loyalty, trust, and subscription dollars to *Exhibitors Herald*.

By the time in 1920 that regional trade papers were springing up in nearly every city with a film row, *Exhibitors Herald* had catapulted itself out of their ranks and become one of the nation’s four major weekly trade papers for the film industry. Quigley no longer viewed his competitors as *Michigan Film Review* and *Amusements*; instead, they were *Motion Picture News*, *Moving Picture World*, and *Exhibitor’s Trade Review*. Meanwhile, William A. Johnston refused to acknowledge *Exhibitors Herald* as anything more than a “regional.” In April 1921, an incensed Quigley declared that “EXHIBITORS HERALD is The One Really NATIONAL Publication of The Motion Picture Industry. It is Nationwide—East, West, North and South—in CIRCULATION, EDITORIAL VISION, INFLUENCE.”⁸⁸ He backed up his claim with circulation data, compiled by an unnamed theater canvasser, that showed that if one excluded New York City, then twice as many exhibitors in the state of New York subscribed to *Exhibitors Herald* (457) than to *Motion Picture News* (218), *Moving Picture World* (162), *Exhibitor’s Trade Review* (161), or *Wid’s* (58).⁸⁹ This “comprehensive and definitive data” fit perfectly within the perception that Quigley wanted to craft, the story he wanted to tell. Quigley sought to flip the script: *News*, *World*, and *Trade Review* were the true regionals since they focused narrowly on the concerns relevant to the industry factions based in Manhattan and Brooklyn. Meanwhile, *Exhibitors Herald* was the true national trade paper, a fact proven by the exhibitors in Buffalo, Rochester, and the rest of New York State who overwhelmingly preferred it over the competition.

Unfortunately for Quigley, his claims about circulation proved to be demonstrably false. He had also made a misstep—picking a fight on quantitative grounds against a trade paper editor who excelled at the art of marshaling data. William A. Johnston went on the counterattack, dismissing the validity of the *Herald’s* numbers and pressing Quigley to adopt the professional standards of the field and

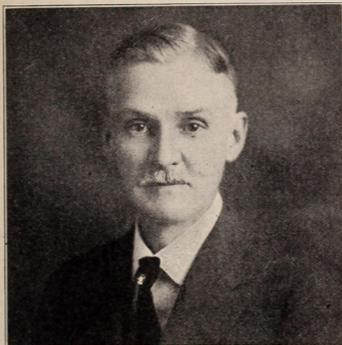
employ the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC).⁹⁰ When *Exhibitors Herald* undertook its first ABC audit in 1923, the results showed that it had 5,991 mail subscribers—considerably fewer than *Motion Pictures News*' 9,234 subscribers and *Moving Picture World*'s 8,102 subscribers in 1921, the year that Quigley had boasted about his superior circulation. *World* and *News* both had 1,193 subscribers in the state of New York, compared to *Herald*'s 540.⁹¹ Even if we accept that a large number of *News* and *World* subscribers were based in New York City, it is nearly impossible for Quigley's math to add up. Quigley would have been on firmer ground to make the claim that his paper had the most subscribers in the Midwest. Because the ABC tracked subscriptions by region, we can go back to the historic reports—now on microfilm—and see that the twelve midwestern and plains states (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas) accounted for 3,306 of *Exhibitors Herald*'s subscriptions, roughly 55 percent of its paid circulation. The ABC report suggests that *Exhibitors Herald*, in the early 1920s, occupied a middle ground between being a super-regional and a national trade paper comparable in reach to *Moving Picture World* and *Motion Picture News*.

The same year as its underwhelming circulation audit, however, *Exhibitors Herald* flexed the loyalty, passion, and influence of its readers. The idea for the "Herald Only" Club first emerged from Ohio exhibitor George Rea, who in May 1923 complained that exhibitors were reporting on movies in a variety of trade papers instead of exclusively in *Exhibitors Herald*. Rea emphatically declared: "I, for one, am going to report my pictures exclusively to the *Herald*'s 'What the Picture Did for Me' department and nowhere else. Let's keep our reports where we know they'll be taken care of by a paper that knows how and isn't afraid."⁹² Quigley coined the term "'Herald Only' Club" and, week by week, tracked the movement's growth (see fig. 19). Although the idea had originally formulated around exclusively *writing* to *Exhibitors Herald*, the club was soon framed as being equally about exclusively *reading* the *Herald*. "It is the only paper I take now and I find it covers everything," wrote a small-town Oklahoma exhibitor in one of many such testimonials published in regard to the "Herald Only" Club.⁹³

Alongside such testimonials, the growing roster of "Herald Only" Club members was frequently published. The December 8, 1923, issue of *Exhibitors Herald* listed seventy-seven club members. They came from thirty different states, and three managed theaters in Canada.⁹⁴ It is worth noting, however, that almost exactly half the members (thirty-eight of seventy-seven) managed theaters in one of six midwestern states: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Nebraska, and Ohio.⁹⁵ Four "Herald Only" members came from the state of New York, but their theaters were all located in small towns more than one hundred miles away from the island of Manhattan. These details suggest that even as *Exhibitors Herald* expanded its distribution beyond the Chicago exchange region, its core constituency of exhibitor readers remained centered in the Midwest, especially in small towns. In her

"Herald Only" Club Album

A face-to-face meeting place where the shoulder-to-shoulder supporters of the box office reports institution may perfect by visualization the pen friendships made through "Herald" columns.



WILLIAM H. CREAL
Suburban Theatre, Omaha, Neb.



GEORGE REA
Colonial Theatre, Washington C. H., O.



FRED S. MEYER
Palace Theatre, Hamilton, O.



PHILIP RAND
Rex Theatre, Salmon, Idaho.

EXHIBITORS HERALD is privileged to devote this space to the further promotion of that unrivalled spirit of exhibitor cooperation that has made possible the development of "What the Picture Did For Me" and "The Box Office Record."

FIGURE 19. Portraits of the "Herald Only" Club's most prolific correspondents, including Idaho exhibitor Philip Rand (lower right), who penned hundreds of "What the Picture Did for Me" reviews. Source: *Exhibitors Herald*, "Herald Only' Club Album," Oct. 6, 1923, 73, https://lantern.mediahist.org/catalog/exhibitorsherald17exhi_0181.

book chapter, “‘What the Picture Did for Me’: Small-Town Exhibitors’ Strategies for Surviving the Great Depression,” film historian Kathryn Fuller-Seeley argues that “the overwhelming majority of the column’s contributors were independent theater owners who operated 200- to 500-seat houses in towns of 5,000 or fewer people. Most of these small-town exhibitors were in the Midwest, Plains, and Mountain states.”⁹⁶ An examination of the “Herald Only” Club list reveals that the demographic trends that Fuller-Seeley identifies for mid-1930s “What the Picture Did for Me” contributors also holds true for the early to mid-1920s.

Philip Rand owned the Rex Theater in Salmon, Idaho, a rural town with a population of 1,311 in 1920. Rand was also an obsessive reviewer of films. His name appears on 531 pages of *Exhibitors Herald* scanned by the Media History Digital Library (MHDL), nearly 70 percent more than the next most prolific “Herald Only” Club member.⁹⁷ True to his word, Rand confined his reviews to the *Herald*’s “What the Picture Did for Me” section and did not publish in competing trade papers. In late 1923, Rand’s writing earned him a trip to Los Angeles, which he reported on in the Christmas issue of *Exhibitors Herald*. When Rand visited the Metro set, he had his photo taken with actress Viola Dana, who appears dressed as a nun as Rand smiles ear to ear and holds an issue of *Exhibitors Herald*. Rand began the article by gently mocking both himself and “Follywood,” but he concluded on an earnest note: “To say that I am surprised is to put it mildly. I am overwhelmed with the high moral tone of the people, their unflinching kindness and the seriousness of their work. I will venture an opinion that no other industry in America has as fine a lot of men and women as the picture industry at Hollywood.”⁹⁸ The box-office revenue that Rand’s rural theater generated for the Hollywood studios was completely insignificant to their bottom lines. Rand’s writing, however, was meaningful to thousands of exhibitors who read *Exhibitors Herald* and rented films. A Hollywood publicist seems to have recognized this and arranged a tour for him accordingly.

Exhibitors Herald had facilitated the growth of a virtual community of exhibitors. It was an exhibitor community connected through shared circumstances rather than by the particular exchanges they used or the state they lived in. And it was a community that had its own star system. For the loyal readers of and contributors to the “What the Picture Did for Me” department, an endorsement from Philip Rand meant more than one from Roxy. And, within this community, Martin J. Quigley was a far more trusted and respected figure than William A. Johnston.

Yet Quigley still envied Johnston. He wanted the prominence among industry leaders and the advertising revenue that Johnston enjoyed. In the same May 26, 1923, issue in which the idea for the “Herald Only” Club was first floated, Quigley launched a new section, titled *Better Theatres*, that was more representative of the path that he would take over the next decade in his quest to overtake Johnston. The structure of *Better Theatres* essentially mimicked that of *Motion Picture*

News' Accessory News (which, as noted in chapter 1, had itself imitated the *Store Equipment* section of the *Dry Goods Economist*). These sections were magnets for equipment advertisers. They allowed the trade papers to charge a premium to manufacturers who wanted their products to appear in the section that would be most closely read by buyers.

The title that Quigley chose for the new section was telling. By calling the new section *Better Theatres*, he tied it fundamentally to the goals of uplifting and advancing motion picture presentation. Without the continual improvement of exhibition spaces, he warned, "there certainly must come a disastrous halt in the progress of the motion picture and the film business."⁹⁹ But it must have seemed unrealistic, even then, that the passionate small-town theater owners of the "Herald Only" Club could afford the fancy screens, seats, and aisle lights advertised in the pages of *Better Theatres*. And club members based in Elgin, Nebraska; Tripoli, Wisconsin; and other small farming communities would have never had the means to put to use the architectural schematics that *Better Theatres* shared and celebrated. Ironically, just as small-town exhibitors were pledging allegiance to the *Herald*, the *Herald* was subscribing to a philosophy that would serve it well yet leave behind many of those same small-town exhibitors during the transition to sound and the Great Depression. Making the film industry better and more profitable meant accepting that the theaters without the money to improve and upgrade would go out of business. This disconnect between *Exhibitors Herald* and its customer base would ultimately spill into conflict and the entry of new competing papers in the years ahead.

CONCLUSION

"A regional is the independent exhibitor's pal," remarked P. S. Harrison. "He reads it to learn about his fellow exhibitors and their problems."¹⁰⁰ Harrison made this observation in the early 1930s, drawing on nearly fifteen years of reading, competing against, and coexisting alongside regional publications such as *Reel Journal* and *Amusements*. Like Harrison's own *Reports*, regionals sought to build and maintain communities among industry participants. Generally, the community-building work was cordial and constructive, seeking to ease and minimize tensions between distributor and exhibitor, between big exhibitor and little exhibitor. Yet this was not always the case; Ray Lewis and P. S. Harrison both, in their own ways, developed their communities through attacking opponents, policing boundaries, and airing grievances rather than attempts at achieving harmony across the industry. Meanwhile, Martin J. Quigley moved between these approaches of inclusion and exclusion, as the industry itself shifted beneath his feet.

The papers surveyed in this chapter began as alternatives to the leading national exhibitor trade papers. By the mid-1930s, however, they would themselves become the leading national trade papers. Martin J. Quigley, Ben Shlyen, Ray Lewis,

P. S. Harrison, and *The Exhibitor's* Jay Emanuel (who eventually replaced David Barrist) would all have publishing careers that far outlasted William A. Johnston, W. Stephen Bush, and Merritt Crawford. As the large New York trade papers fought with one another for dominance, their ultimate successors were trying out new strategies and building up reader loyalty in exchange cities across North America.

Innovations in trade paper publishing were also taking place in the capital of film production. The next chapter looks at the explosive growth of film industry trade papers in Los Angeles and the roles they played in the creation of 1920s Hollywood culture.