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February 18, 2015

THIS WEEK:

Fire Protection During the Exhibition of Motion Pictures

BACKGROUND:

The 46th General Assembly convened January 14, 1935, and adjourned April 23, 1935, a 100-day session. There were 158 members in the Legislature, 58 Democratic members in the House of Representatives and 50 Republican members. The Senate had 28 Democratic members and 22 Republican members. Lieutenant Governor Nelson Kraschel presided in the Senate. John Mitchell was Speaker of the House. Clyde Herring was the Governor, having been inaugurated to his first term on January 12, 1933, at the age of 53. Iowa's population at the 1930 Federal Census was 2,470,939.

Fire Protection During the Exhibition of Motion Pictures



Senator Chris Reese

Senator Chris Reese from the 28th district, Marshall County, was born in Hovedgaard, Denmark, June 21, 1881. He came to the United States with his parents in 1891. Reese had a high school education. He became involved in newspaper business in 1906, editor of the *Linn Grove Independent*, the *Remsen News*, the *Carroll Times*, and the *Marshalltownian* at Marshalltown, Iowa. Reese was married September 14, 1902, to Jennie Pearl Rucker at Alta, Iowa. He had four children, Marian, James, Creston, and Donald. After serving in the Legislature, he was co-editor of the *Upper Des Moines* from 1941 to 1945. He became owner of the *Ocheyedan Press*

until 1947. Senator Reese was also a professional musician. He had his own orchestra and played in the Marshalltown Theater during the time of silent movies.

Film, fire, and fumes

In the 1920s and 1930s the film used in motion pictures and x-rays was highly flammable. This film commonly referred to as "Nitrate" film was so combustible it would create more smoke when doused with water. Unlike many other flammable materials, nitrocellulose does not need air to keep burning as the reaction produces oxygen. Once burning, it is extremely difficult to extinguish. Immersing burning film in water may not extinguish it and could actually increase the amount of



Fumes released from the burning of cellulose nitrate film caused most of the 123 deaths and dozens of injuries at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation on May 15, 1929.

smoke produced. Traditional firefighting methods were all but useless in controlling the smoke produced by this type of film.

Senator Reese introduced a bill regulating fire protection "during the exhibition of motion pictures in theaters, amusement places, and public

buildings." The bill called for strict safety guidelines. Projection rooms or booths should be constructed of fire resistive materials, two feet of space on each side and behind the projector, all observation or port hole openings protected with self-closing shutters of fire resistant materials. Projection rooms were to have overhead ventilators at least 18 inches in diameter. Operators were not to leave the operating side of the machine, engage in unnecessary conversation, or any other work in the booth while operating the projector. Motion picture films were to be stored in fire resistive containers. Every projection room was to have two fire extinguishers. By the time this bill was introduced, nitrate film was no longer used for x-rays.

Ames Daily Tribune

Friday, April 7, 1933

Film Operator Dives 20 Ft. to Escape Death

DES MOINES (U.P.) — Diving Head foremost from the flaming theater projection room in which he was trapped, Meyer Sutton, motion picture operator, narrowly escaped death Thursday night.

Trapped between the flaming projection and the only door in the small local picture house, Sutton attempted to extinguish the fire while the theater manager outside the booth shouted for him to run thru the flames.

Unable to control the blaze, Sutton dived 20 feet head-first to the lobby below, striking his head on the tile floor. He was knocked unconscious for several minutes. His condition was not considered serious.

Only a small crowd was attending the show at the time. Glass was broken in the lobby doors as patrons rushed for the exits. No one was injured.

Damages to the theater projection room was estimated at \$8,000. Two sound machines and several films were destroyed.



The Glen Cinema Disaster in Paisley, Scotland, killed dozens of children at a matinee on December 31, 1929. A total of 71* lost their lives that day.



*NOTE: Newspaper article pictured has incorrect number as "72 dead."