# THE "MOVIE KINGS" OF EARLY FLOSSMOOR

Written for the Flossmoor Public Library By David Martin, Adult Services Manager



# BACKGROUND

Between 1900 and 1915, Flossmoor had a sparse population of year-round residents and a second set of landowners who treated the area as a part-time residence—a place they could go in the summer or on weekends to escape the crowded and polluted cities. In addition to the fresh country air, Chicago's elite were attracted to Flossmoor because of its convenient location on the Illinois Central Railroad as well as the Flossmoor and Idlewild country clubs promising golf and recreation. Naturally, a family that could afford two (or more) residences was quite well-to-do. This article is about two extraordinary and unique men—Adolph Linick and Aaron J. Jones— who were trailblazers in the entertainment industry, opening the very first movie theatre in Chicago. In 1912, riding high on box office receipts from over a dozen theatres, the two men built a joint estate at the corner of Dixie Highway and Holbrook Road, making Flossmoor their families' summer home. Although one would only own a home in Flossmoor for a little over ten years, the other would stay in Flossmoor for over thirty years, until his death in 1944.



Aaron J. Jones



Adolph Linick

## THE COMPANY

It is believed that Aaron Jones and Adolph Linick first met in 1904 as executives of the White City Amusement Park in Chicago. Jones was born in 1876 in Chicago, while Linick was born in Germany in 1869 and emigrated to Chicago as a young man. When they met, each already had extensive work history and a background in entertainment and vaudeville. In 1905, they opened a penny arcade together in downtown Chicago at 308 S. State Street. People in this era were obsessed with coin-operated mechanical marvels like the ones they had in their arcade. Although the machines only cost the customer a penny to run, Jones & Linick were soon amassing a small fortune. They then incorporated their own firm, Midland Machine Company, that they used to manufacture and sell their own penny arcade machines. Meanwhile, they had each continued to engage in the vaudeville circuit as promoters and producers, and they were well-positioned to use their new fortunes to step into the "next big thing" of the era: motion pictures.

On Christmas Day 1905, Jones & Linick opened the very first theatre dedicated solely to film in Chicago, on State Street near Adams. This unnamed theatre was primitive when contrasted with the movie palaces of later years. Jones & Linick essentially took an empty store front, put in folding chairs and a projector, and started charging admission. Their makeshift theatre sat 300 people and a ticket cost a nickel (hence the term, "nickelodeons"). Despite its primitivism, the small theatre was a sensation and drew sold-out crowds for films like *The Great Train Robbery*, a 12-minute long film from 1903. Soon nickelodeons were opening all over the city by rival firms. Jones & Linick took on another partner (Peter Schaefer) and, under the firm name of Jones, Linick, and Shaefer (JL&S), set out to create a theatre empire to rival any other in the city. Across the street from their original storefront theatre, JL&S opened the 799-seat Orpheum Theatre on September 9th, 1907. At first, the Orpheum was strictly live entertainment—vaudeville—while movies were still relegated to the less palatial nickelodeons. Aaron Jones, ever the trailblazer, decided in 1909 that the Orpheum could also host movies—becoming one of the first true "movie palaces" in Chicago.

After achieving success at the Orpheum, JL&S continued to build or acquire several more large theatres in the Loop and in outlying neighborhoods. Some were still devoted to vaudeville acts or "legitimate" theatre, while others were devoted to movies or showed a mixture of vaudeville and movies. Altogether, the firm owned at least thirty different theatres at various points in time—including the former Homewood Theatre in downtown Homewood. In the early days, movies were so popular that almost all of them were open over 14 hours per day and one of them—the Lyric Theatre at 252 S. State Street—ran movies 24 hours a day, only taking brief pauses to let audiences cycle in and out. In 1914, the trade journal *Motography* estimated the JL&S theatres were serving 50,000 patrons per day. (*Please see appendix A for a partial list of theatres the JL&S firm acquired or managed and details on each one.*)

In 1923, at the age of 54, Adolph Linick decided he had worked enough, earned enough, and was ready to retire off to sunny Los Angeles. Although the firm retained his name after his departure, Linick was no longer an active partner. The firm suffered losses during the Great Depression and faced increased competition from other theatrical firms such as the great Balaban & Katz. When Aaron J. Jones died in 1944 in Flossmoor, his obituary stated the firm was down to three theatres: The McVickers and the LaSalle downtown, and the Homewood Theatre in downtown Homewood. In the 1950s, the advent of television also affected the firm negatively. By 1961, the firm had its final curtain call and was no more.



The Orpheum was Jones, Linick, & Schaefer's first "movie palace," as well as the home to the firm's central offices. The film on the marquee, Burning Sands, was a 1922 release.



After owning a home in Flossmoor for 25 years, Aaron Jones' firm finally opened a "hometown theatre" in downtown Homewood in 1937. The theatre, built in a former auto garage, was sold by the firm in 1952. It was demolished in 1992.



JL&S owned the McVickers for a total of 40 years. This photo is the second McVickers theatre, replaced by the firm in 1922 with the final version featured on the cover page of this article.



The Rialto Theatre at 336 S. State Street opened in 1917 for vaudeville and movies.

All images on this page courtesy of www.cinematreasures.org

## THE ESTATE

By 1912, Jones & Linick each lived in luxurious apartment hotels—as was customary for the urban wealthy in that time—on Chicago's fashionable South Shore. However, they were looking for more space to spread out and a more wholesome, less polluted environment for their families to spend their summers. It was then that they decided to build side-by-side homes on a large piece of land in rural Flossmoor. Jones & Linick were both Jewish—although it has been said that they were not practicing—and they were likely attracted to the property by its proximity to the Idlewild Country Club just across the street. Idlewild was established in 1908 as a Jewish alternative to the older Flossmoor Country Club, which excluded Jews. In fact, Aaron Jones served at least one term as President of Idlewild during his time in Flossmoor.

Many of the details we know about the Jones/Linick estate come from the memoirs of Geraldine Nelson Aron, former Flossmoor resident. Geraldine's father Arthur Nelson was the groundskeeper/caretaker for the estate and the Nelson family lived full-time in an apartment above the garage on the estate until 1928. In addition to Arthur, the estate employed maids, chefs, and chauffeurs. The land that would become the estate was purchased in either 1910 or 1911 from the Stelter family, who had a large amount of farmland in the area. Two houses were designed by architect Henry L. Newhouse. Newhouse, who had designed theatres for the JL&S firm, designed the homes in the style of Frank Lloyd Wright, whose residential work he greatly admired. The houses were set at the top of a small hill at the end of a long, curving driveway that started at the corner of Holbrook Road and Dixie Highway. In addition to the homes, the estate featured the aforementioned garage with apartment above and a greenhouse attached to the rear.

Besides the buildings, the estate featured extensive landscaping. Geraldine Nelson describes a lush Japanese garden installed around 1915: "Paths led the visitor through the garden and over a little curved Japanese-style bridge spanning a small elongated pond. There was a stone well—the "wishing well"—with a wooden bucket...There were a couple of other structures that supported oriental-type thatched roofs. They seemed to have no purpose other than to provide shade under which one could linger on a warm summer day." In addition to the Japanese Garden was the larger "Sunken Garden," so named because of its low-lying topography as compared to the houses on the hill. Again, Geraldine describes the scene: "The layout was extremely formal—very different in feeling from the Japanese Garden...As one entered the garden through an opening in a hedgerow, one came upon a wooden platform or deck with stairs on either side leading down into the garden below...One could pause a moment and view the beauty of what lay before them. A well-manicured lawn surrounded numerous flower beds of different shapes and in the center of one or two of them were small round pools with water fountains spurting up in the center of them." Later this wooden viewing platform was replaced with elaborate stonework installed by Geraldine's father.

The estate was described both as a peaceful, quiet escape and also as a "show place" for extravagant events. Indeed, in her memoirs Geraldine describes "movie nights" on the estate, which involved an outdoor screen and projector as well as bleachers her dad had built for the audience. The assembled audience—made up of friends, neighbors, and Idlewild members—would be treated to the newest releases. Geraldine was particularly fond of the "Rin Tin Tin" adventures. One particular summer visitor Geraldine notes was Louis B. Mayer, one of the founders of MGM Studios in Hollywood. He was instrumental in the Linick family's relocation to California in 1923, which altered life for the company and for the estate.



Mr. and Mrs. Adolph Linick and family, of the Chicago Beach Hotel, anticipating the approach of an early Spring, have opened their Flossmoor country estate, which is one of the show places of the South Shore.

A notice from the society page of The Jewish Sentinel, a weekly Chicago publication, indicates how the Jones-Linick estate was known as a "showplace."

#### Idlewild Country Club



A contemporary map that represents the massive size of the original estate. The house outlined in red is the remaining original Linick (later Jones) house; the other 15 houses highlighted in the yellow area between Holbrook Road and Sylvan Court are from later subdivisions of the land. The images on the next two pages are all sourced from Geraldine Nelson Aron's memoirs. Most of these photographs are from the 1920s and the resolution and quality is lacking compared to modern photographs.

Group One: Scenes from the "Japanese Garden"



# Group 2: Scenes from the "Sunken Garden"





At right is a stone wall and staircase that provided entry to the sunken garden from the houses. This was built by Arthur Nelson around 1928 to replace an earlier wooden structure.





Group 3: The garage, with caretaker apartment above and greenhouse behind.







Group 4: The house and grounds





# CONCLUSION

By 1923, Adolph Linick's daughter Elsie had married a man named Sidney Weisman, who took a job in his father-in-law's theatrical firm. While movie studio executive Louis B. Mayer was visiting the Flossmoor estate, he offered Sidney Weisman a position at MGM Studios. Sidney took him up on the offer and made plans to relocate to Los Angeles. At the same time Adolph, an astonishingly wealthy man at the age of 54, decided it was time for retirement. He divested himself of his share of the firm and his Chicago real estate and joined his daughter and son-in-law in their relocation. Adolph purchased a mansion in West Hollywood just a few doors down from Sunset Boulevard. The entire Linick/Weisman clan, along with their servants, moved into the large colonial-style home. Adolph owned the home in West Hollywood until his death in 1967 at the age of 97. Ownership of the home was then transferred to his daughter Elsie Weisman, who lived there until her death in the year 2000 at the age of 101. As part of her will, Elsie left the California mansion to the city of West Hollywood, which converted the grounds into a public park and is currently converting the mansion into a public arts center.

With the Linicks departing the Flossmoor estate in 1923, Aaron Jones decided to sell his summer home and purchase Jones' former summer home. At this time, Linick's former home was moved closer to then-new Sylvan Court and adapted for year-round living. Jones retained ownership over the bulk of the estate, including the Sunken Garden and Japanese Garden. Over the years, as his theatrical empire faded, portions of the estate were sold off for five or six newer houses that were built on the north side of Sylvan Court. Aaron J. Jones died at his Flossmoor home in 1944 at the age of 68.

After Aaron Jones' death, the grand home he lived in on Sylvan Court from 1923 to 1944 continued to house extraordinary and unique people. Perhaps most notable was Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and her husband Manny Ross. Elisabeth, originally from Switzerland, was a professional psychiatrist who, in 1965, decided to begin interviewing hospital patients dealing with terminal illness. This led to a desire to improve how the medical establishment treats the dying patient. Her 1969 book *On Death and Dying* is considered a landmark work on the subject of end-of-life care and is still used today at major medical school programs. Specifically, her proposal that there are five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—became internationally known even amongst non-professionals. Elisabeth lived in the home from approximately 1966—1976 and it is believed she wrote her first—and most famous— book in the home's office. She died in 2004 in Arizona.

Historical records indicate Aaron Jones' first summer home still existed as late as 1990. That home, and what remained of the estate's massive gardens, was lost when the neighborhood known as Butterfield Pointe (consisting of nine large houses on Gianna Drive) was developed around 1992. Today, the only remnant of the formerly vast estate is the single family home on Sylvan Court on a comparatively small lot of just over one acre. The house still retains its prairie-style architecture and is considered a gem of historic preservation in Flossmoor.

The three images directly below are sourced from the memoirs of John Bush Jones, grandson of Aaron Jones, published in "Rhode Island Jewish Historical Society Notes" Volume 15, Number 1, November 2007.



From left to right: Peter Schaefer, Adolph Linick, Aaron J. Jones



Aaron Jones's home on Sylvan Court.

management. The boys are extending congratulations to Aaron Jones, of Jones, Linick & Schaefer on his election as president of the Idlewild Country Club.

Announcement in the "Moving Picture World," a theatrical trade journal, about Jones being elected as President of Idlewild. January 16,1926.

At right, an article from *The Jewish Sentinel* on July 20, 1917, describes Jones' appointment by President Woodrow Wilson to represent Illinois on the "War Cooperation Committee" of the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry.

AARON J. JONES REQUESTED BY PRESIDENT WILSON TO IOIN BRADY'S COMMITTEE

Aaron J. Jones, president of Jones, Linick & Schaefer, received a wire' from William A. Brady last Thursday reading as follows: "At the request of the President of the United States, I invite you to serve as a member of the war-co-operation committee of the National Association of the motion pleture Industry. Signed, William A. Brady,"

Brady," Mr. Jones accepted and will represent the state of litinois. This is one of the greatest honors conferred upon members of the great unstion picture industry and Mr. Jones will prove an emergetic member of Mr. Brady's committee.



Aaron J. Jones and his wife Ella



Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross is interviewed inside her home, the former Aaron Jones home, in 1974. Video still from youtube.com

The images on the next two pages were produced and are copyrighted by VHT Studios, a real estate photography firm, the last time the Aaron Jones house was available for sale in 2017. The Flossmoor Public Library is using these images under the Fair Use Doctrine (as this document is for nonprofit educational use).



Prairie-style homes tend to have strong horizontal features and lowslung rooflines. Frank Lloyd Wright believed a home should "blend in" with its natural surroundings whenever possible, and repudiated the tall, turreted homes popular in the Victorian age. Henry Newhouse, the architect of this house, clearly followed this edict when he designed the broad overhanging eaves for the house's porches.



Stained glass windows using geometric shapes that vaguely resemble natural motifs such as petals and leaves, like these at the home's entry, is a hallmark of Prairie Style.



The stained glass pattern is also used in these windows in the dining room at the back of the house.



The "public" space of the house is designed as a long, open floorplan in the center of the home, with a front library flowing into to a living room and then a dining room at the back of the house. The private spaces, such as bedrooms, bathrooms and the family kitchen, are in wings on either side of this space.



Geometric shapes created by the woodwork stand out as a strong design feature. The high clerestory windows above the room allow an abundance of natural light to the center of the home.

# APPENDIX A: A PARTIAL LIST OF THEATRES OWNED BY JONES, LINICK, & SCHAEFER (JL&S)

According to some sources, the JL&S firm owned or managed over thirty theatres at various points in time—in the city of Chicago, the suburban area, and even Wisconsin and Indiana. In addition, through partnerships with Loews and other chains, the firm had equity in over 200 theatres nationwide. This list contains seventeen of the more interesting local theatres. All addresses are in the city of Chicago unless otherwise noted.

(Note: the term "legitimate theatre" refers to full-length plays, musicals, Broadway shows, opera, etc. whereas "vaudeville" refers to a presentation of short-form variety acts.)

**Bijou Dream,** 114 S. State, owned 1907—1922. Built by JL&S right next to their larger Orpheum Theatre. Originally showed vaudeville on the main floor and ran a small Nickelodeon on the second floor. By 1915 the Bijou Dream was showing feature films only. Closed in 1922 and converted into a candy store, it is now an office building.

**Colonial,** 24-28 W. Randolph, owned 1913--1924. Site of the greatest tragedy in American theatre history. The Colonial was originally opened in 1903 for live theatre as The Iroquois. One month later, with a sold-out crowd of 1900 people, a fire began on the stage. By the end of the catastrophe, 602 people were either burned or trampled to death. After a period of mourning and investigation, the building was determined to be structurally sound and was remodeled and reopened as the Colonial in 1905. Upon acquiring the theatre in 1913, JL&S changed its offerings from legitimate theatre to vaudeville. In 1915, they initiated an unusual policy of showing films during the summer months and keeping the rest of the calendar as vaudeville. The theatre was closed and demolished in 1924 to make way for the 19-story United Masonic Building, which housed the Oriental Theatre (Now the James M. Nederlander Theatre).



**Hale's Tours,** 110 S. State, owned 1906--1906. An unusual attraction in the early years of motion pictures. Patrons would pay a nickel to sit in a faux railroad car while moving scenes of exotic locations were projected outside of each window; the effect was said to simulate travel in a distant land. To complete the illusion, the train car would constantly shake while sometimes a whistle blew or a bell rang. JL&S ran this location for a year before demolishing it for the building of the Orpheum Theatre. **Homewood,** 18110 S. Dixie Highway, Homewood, owned 1937—1952. The Homewood Theatre was converted from an auto garage by the firm in 1937. By this time, Aaron Jones and his family had owned the estate in Flossmoor for 25 years, so this was their "hometown" theatre, just 1.5 miles up the road from the estate. The theatre sat 600 people and was a major part of life and culture in downtown Homewood. After Aaron Jone's death in 1944, the firm ran the theatre for 8 more years before selling to a group of local businessmen in 1952. The theatre ran until 1984, and was ultimately razed to construct the parking lot adjacent to Melody Mart. See page 4 for a vintage photograph.

La Salle, 110 W. Madison, owned 1913—1949. Built in 1902 as the "La Salle Opera House" by another company. JL&S purchased the LaSalle in 1913 and began showing movies in 1915. In 1927, JL&S leased the theatre to James Rodor. In 1950, the property was sold to the Franciscan Fathers Roman Catholic order, who razed the building to construct St. Peter's Church.



**Lyric,** 348 S. State, owned 1907—1915. Built by JL&S. Built for movies only and sat 500. The only 24-hour movie theatre in the world at the time. Closed in 1915. Now part of the site of Pritzker Park.

**Lyric,** 320 S. State, owned 1916—1921. Built by JL&S. Not to be confused with the above Lyric. This theatre sat 286 and closed in 1921. Now part of the site of Pritzker Park.

**Majestic,** 18 W. Monroe, leased 1934—1934. Built by another company in 1906, this theatre sat 2000 and began as a "legitimate" theatre. By 1934 the theatre was showing films and doing poor business. JL&S signed a one-year lease on the theatre that year. After the lease was up, the theatre went dark for 11 years. In 1945 it was remodeled and reopened as the Shubert, showing Broadway shows. It is currently known as the CIBC Theatre.

**McVickers,** 25 W. Madison, owned 1913—1926 and from 1934—1961. The McVickers is one of the longestlived names in Chicago theatre. Originally opened for legitimate theatre in 1854 by actor and producer James McVickers, the theatre's first building burned in the 1871 Great Chicago Fire, but was rebuilt the following year on the same site. In 1884-85, it was entirely remodeled by the firm of Adler & Sullivan. JL&S acquired the theatre in 1913, and began presenting vaudeville & film. In 1922, JL&S demolished this version of the theatre to rebuild another, designed by Henry Newhouse. Balaban & Katz owned the theatre from 1926— 1934, when JL&S took it over again. This is the last theatre JL&S ran, and they sold it in 1961. The theatre closed in 1984 and was torn down in 1985 for an office building. See page 4 and the cover page for vintage photographs of McVickers version 2 and McVickers version 3, respectively. **Orpheum,** 110-112 S. State, owned 1907—1925. Built by JL&S, Showed vaudeville exclusively at first, later opened for motion pictures in 1909. Considered the firm's first "movie palace," it sat 799 people. In 1925, JL&S subleased the theatre to Warner Bros. to premier their movies. In 1937, the theatre was destroyed to open a shoe shop. See page 4 for a vintage photograph.

**Randolph,** 14-16 W. Randolph, owned 1918—1922. Built by JL&S as a movie house. Designed by Henry L. Newhouse and sat 845 people. In 1922, JL&S leased operations to Universal Film Exchange. The theatre closed in 1933 and was converted into the Old Heidelberg Restaurant (1934—1963) and then Ronny's Steak House (1963—1999). Then the old building was razed. The new building located at this address retained the unique façade of the Old Heidelberg Restaurant and is currently housing a Blick's Art Supplies store.



**Rialto,** 336 S. State, owned 1917—1944. Built by JL&S for both vaudeville and movies. Designed by Marshall & Fox and containing just over 1500 seats. In 1919 the theatre began hosting occasional burlesque performances. From 1931—1936 the theatre was renamed the Loop-End and showed strictly burlesque. In 1937, the city shut down the theatre for indecency. In 1944, JL&S sold the theatre. It closed down for good in 1954. Site currently forms part of Pritzker Park. See page 4 for a vintage photograph.

**State-Lake,** 190 N. State, leased 1933—1937. Built in 1919 by another company as a vaudeville house. This massive 2649 seat theatre was a major moneymaker throughout the 1920s. When JL&S acquired the lease, it was splitting time between vaudeville and film. Balaban & Katz then acquired the theatre. In 1984, the theatre showed its last film—*Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*—and then was remodeled into studios and offices for WLS-TV (Channel 7).

**Studebaker**, 410 S. Michigan, leased 1914—1917. Built in 1885 as an 8-story building for the Studebaker Carriage Company for sales and manufacturing. After they moved out in 1898, the building was renovated into the Fine Arts Building. The remodel created two theaters: the 1000 seat Studebaker and the 450 seat Fine Arts Theatre. The Studebaker presented legitimate theatre until 1914 when JL&S started a three year lease to show films. After that lease ended, the Studebaker presented live theatre and movies for several decades. It currently serves as the home of National Public Radio's *Wait Wait...Don't Tell Me*! which is recorded in front of a live audience.



The interior of the Studebaker

**Wilson Avenue,** 1050 W. Wilson Avenue, owned 1909—1919. Built by JL&S as a vaudeville house, later converting to films. Sat 900 people. The theatre was sold in 1919 to a bank and continued to operate as a bank under several different corporate names until 2011. In 2018, legendary rock club Double Door, formerly in Chicago's Wicker Park, announced plans to renovate this building for live music. As of May 2024, renovation is still ongoing.



**Woods,** 50 W. Randolph, owned 1923—1938. Built by another company in 1918 for legitimate theatre and was converted to a movie house when JL&S acquired it in 1923. The theatre, which sat 1200, was part of a 10 -story office building designed by noted architects Marshall & Fox. JL&S sold the theatre to Essaness, who later sold it to Cineplex Odeon. The movie theatre closed in 1989 and was demolished for a retail and office building. At the time, it was the only movie theatre still operating in the Loop, which at one time housed at least three dozen. The neighborhood would have no silver screens until the Gene Siskel Film Center opened in 2001.

### Sources

As always, I am deeply indebted to those individuals below who have written and researched these subjects before I did. In particular, the works of Konrad Schiecke and Geraldine Nelson Aron, as well as the Cinema Treasures website, were indispensable to the production of this work.

When researching local history, one often finds contradicting sources. For example, one source may say a theatre opened in 1904 while another source says 1906. I tried my best to reconcile any such contradictions. Should the reader note any errors or omissions in this work, please e-mail flossref@flossmoorlibrary.org and they may be corrected in an updated edition at a later date.

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