

Bloomsburg History, Hollywood Style
Recently found film may be Columbia County's oldest
By Mark Fritz

My friend George Samuels called me recently and said he had an old movie film that he wanted to contribute to the CCH&GS. It had been in the rafters of his parents' garage for many years. He said it was labeled: *Bits of Bloomsburg*.

I immediately thought it might be related to the 16mm Kiwanis footage from 1939. I asked him if it was 16mm, and he said he didn't know. After I got a look at it, I saw that it is a 35mm film. That's not an ordinary thing to have lying around; 35mm is the format used for Hollywood-style feature films. You don't ordinarily see that outside of movie theater projection rooms. Most of the films still in circulation/existence are either 8mm home movies or those 16mm educational films that we saw too many of in school. Big format (35mm) films have always been rare, and today, they are practically extinct thanks to the "Digital Age."

It's difficult to look at any movie film without a professional "viewer" device, but the crude way is to simply unwind a few feet and hold the film up to the light. By doing so, I discovered that the title screen of this one reads: **The Capitol Theatre / Under Direction / Comerford Theatres, Inc. / presents / "BITS OF BLOOMSBURG."**

Unreeling some more footage reveals another title page that reads: **View of Bloomsburg From Top of New High School.** The footage seems to be of the camera panning to show a panorama of Bloomsburg.

More unreeling leads to the next title page, which reads: **Bloomsburg's New Institution of Amusement.**

The word that stands out in both title screens is the word NEW. Now, one couldn't shoot a panorama of Bloomsburg from on top of the "new" high school down by the river because it is only two-stories and all you'd get would be shots of the river and the sewage plant. No, the reference has to be to the building most of us know as the "old" high school, there on First and Center streets. Today it is a run-down apartment building that houses college students.

That high school was actually Bloomsburg's second high school. The first one stood on what is now that apartment building's parking lot. When I went to "junior high" there some years ago, this lot was the playground. The old-old Bloomsburg High School burned down on Oct. 23, 1923. It took the Bloomsburg school board nearly four years to replace it. (This is all covered in nice detail in our *Discovering Bloomsburg* book, by the way.) Classes were first held in the "new"



Bloomsburg High School on March 14, 1927. The official dedication ceremonies were held April 28 & 29, 1927.

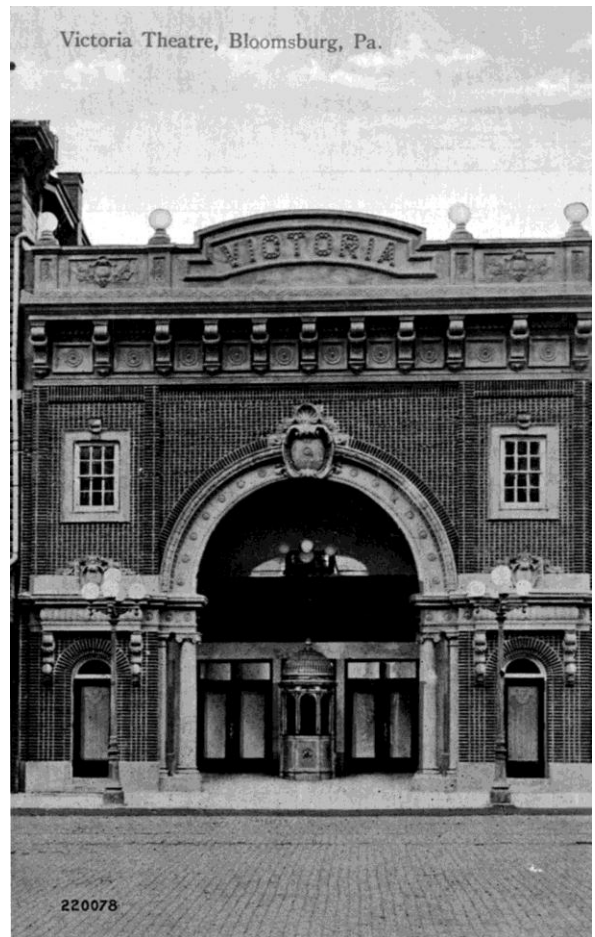
So if this 35mm film refers to the High School as NEW, then this film must have been shot soon after the new high school was built.

The next use of the word NEW is in reference to the Capitol Theatre. Like the high school, it too was new, replacing the old Victoria Theatre, which (like the old high school) had been also a fire victim. Fire had destroyed it on March 12, 1927.

Bloomsburg's second high school, First and Center Streets



Bloomsburg's First High School



Victoria Theatre before the fire

So these “new” references give us an approximate date of the film. Additionally, the footage that follows the “...New Institution...” title shows the Capitol Theatre with 1920s era cars parked (diagonally) in front of it and workmen working on the façade.

The *Paging Though the Past* book quotes from the Morning Press regarding the opening of the “new” Capitol Theatre, thus:

Bloomsburg's new \$175,000 theater, The Capitol, opens tonight, boasting improvements in design and equipment seldom seen outside large cities. Among the features of the 980-seat theater, the largest in the section, are state-of-the-art projection equipment, a two-manual Wurlitzer pipe organ, and automatic ticket machines and coin changers.

And the date of the newspaper story was March 6, 1928.

So my theory is that this film was probably commissioned by the Comerford theatre chain as part of the opening celebrations and publicity campaign for Bloomsburg’s Capitol Theatre, perhaps for the opening night itself. There is more research that needs to be done to confirm this, but there’s certainly enough initial information here to make for an interesting project.



Victoria Theatre after the fire

By the way, this is not a long film; it totals only about 8 minutes, but what exactly is contained in those 7 or so minutes beyond the initial footage that I unwound is unknown at this point. To conveniently see that footage, one would need either a projector or a viewing device. But the potential is tantalizing. Moving images of Bloomsburg in 1928. Wow! And big hi-def 35mm images, Hollywood style. Double wow!

I’m proposing that the Society accept the donation of this film and that we look to its restoration and eventual showing. Who has a 35mm projector? Well, even the movie theaters don’t have them

anymore; they've all gone digital. Also, the film will need to be cleaned before it is projected. Ah, now we're talking money, aren't we? Yes, nothing good in life comes for free.

As with our previous film project (the Kiwanis 1939 film), this footage should be converted to a digital format—another cost, but, thankfully, this film is rather short, so the cost will not be great. Once digitized, the film could be posted on our website as a draw, as a service to our members, and as a source of publicity. Or we could arrange for public showings. Exactly how the film would be shown and otherwise dealt with will be up for discussion by the Board of Directors.

For the present, I'm running this project up the flag pole to see who salutes it. Currently, Interim President Bob Dunkelberger and I comprise an ad hoc mini-committee of two, and we're anxious for more membership participation. If you're interested in helping, please contact either Bob or me.

We are also seeking donations to cover costs. We think the digitization can be accomplished for less than \$1000. Nothing good in life comes for free.