When Movies Were Magic…And Musical

Dad's "Sonny Boy"

IT SEEMS that everyone had a nickname while I grew up, during the Depres-sion, in Donora, Pennsylva-nia. Some of my nicknames were "Shucks," because that's what I'd say when something went wrong, and "Shoes," because I hardly ever wore them.

However, my dad gave me the one nickname that stuck when he took me to see the first "talkie" to hit our movie theater. I never forget holding his hand as we walked along.

The movie was The Singing Fool. When star Al Jolson sang Sonny Boy, my dad gave me a little hug. That hug made me answer to "Sonny" from that moment on.

Later on, I did anything to get the 11¢ required to see Westerns featuring Buck Jones, Tim McCoy, Bob Steel and Tom Mix. I also loved the 12-week "captures" featuring Dick Tracy, the Lone Ranger, the Painted Stallion, The Spider, Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon.

To earn money, I taught my brother "Killer" how to go through ditches picking up old rags, bones and bits of wire or metal to sell to the junk man.

Since you could walk into or leave the theater at any time, we'd sometimes see the feature over and over, leaving only when we got too hungry to stay.

—Walter D., St. Petersburg, Florida

Big Bands at the Movies

I LIVED in Washington Heights, in Manhattan, New York, during the late 1930s and most of the 1940s. On Saturdays, my friend Stan Garnett and I would pack a sandwich, take the subway to Times Square and get in line at the Paramount Theatre, which had

a unique presentation of Big Bands.

The lineup of short subjects, previews, a newsreel and the feature film would begin at 11 a.m. After the movie, with only the exit signs glowing in the dark, an entire band would rise out of the depths on a platform in the orchestra pit.

The band would be playing its theme song, and the only glow would come from the music-stand lights and a pencil spotlight shining on Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman or any other bandleader set for an engagement.

The following hour would feature all the numbers that had made the band famous; it still give me goose bumps to think about it. The band would then descend out of sight after the performance as the house lights came back on.

I don't recall what the tickets cost, but they could not have been too much, because we couldn't afford more than 50¢, plus 10¢ for the subway.

—William M., South Bend, Indiana

Tammy Had Lasting Effect

AFTER GRADUATING from East Stroudsburg University in 1959, I remained in Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains to work in a resort and have a fun summer.

One evening, while visiting another resort, I saw the prettiest blond I had ever seen. Tammy, a song from the movie Tammy and the Bachelor and sung by Debbie Reynolds, was being played on a record.

I asked the beautiful young lady, Darla Bailor, if she'd like to dance, and we ended up dancing all summer long, especially when Tammy was being played. We even sang to each other as we danced.

One evening, in late summer, I changed the words from “Tammy’s in love” to “Ken’s in love.” Darla’s feelings were mutual, and after she graduated from Elizabethtown College, in 1960, we were married, in ’61. To this day, Tammy is still our song.

.—Kenneth H., Hellertown, Pennsylvania

Musical Projection

IN 1931, when I was about 3 years old, Mother and Dad took me to the Valencia movie theater, near our home in Jamaica, New York. The Valencia was the largest and most luxurious of the theaters in town, with twinkling stars in a deep-blue ceiling, resembling a clear evening.

Between the newsreels, cartoon and feature film, an area of box seats would light up and a magnificent organ would appear. The gentleman organist asked the audience to sing along as a bouncing ball moved over the words to popular songs on the movie screen.

The organist played, the ball bounced and a child’s voice was then heard above everyone else’s. The organist stopped and asked the spotlight man to find the soloist, much to the laughter of everyone and the embarrassment of my parents. Mother said nothing stopped my concert until I had finished the song and received applause.

—Marie P., Huntington Station, New York