

## John Frederick Schlez and the Movie Theater

THE FIRST MOVIE THEATRE in Tyrrell County was started in 1914 or 1915 by a young German, Fred Schlez. Mr Schlez was only a teenager when he came to Columbia in 1910, and he had only been in America for a few months.

He was born on January 31, 1889 in Schonfeld, Germany, the son of Karl and Anna Schlez. He was still a teenager when the German government started drafting men for military service in preparation for the first world war. Young Mr Schlez wanted no part in the war he sensed was coming, so he stowed away on a freight boat leaving for America. He stayed hidden until the ship was too far out to sea for the captain to return him to his homeland. When he was found, the captain told him that he would have to turn him over to the immigration authorities when they arrived in America. Mr Schlez worked for his passage, and when the ship neared port he jumped overboard and swam ashore, for he had no intention of taking a chance on being sent back to Germany.

He had no passport, no visa, and no friends. He was a young man without food, money, or clothes, and considered himself lucky to get odd jobs for his lodging and meals. Mr Schlez avoided crowds. He decided to build a houseboat and in it follow the coastline until he found a more suitable climate for living without money. His dream was to make the houseboat his home and live off fish and berries. He built the boat himself out of discarded lumber which he found at trash dumps and around building sites, and set off headed south for a new life.

When his houseboat came in and moored near Captain Bob Knight's Fish House on the Scuppernong River, he must have been very tired, because he wasn't seen for more than a day by the people living along Water Street. His strange boat made the people both suspicious and curious, for it wasn't often that something as unusual as Mr Schlez's boat arrived in the small, somewhat isolated town of Columbia. Admittedly, his boat did look a little sinister, as it was constructed out of some new but mostly old pieces of lumber and was dingy and unpainted.

What the people found was a desolate-looking young man with sunken eyes, unshaved face, and a generally half-starved appearance. The kind-hearted townspeople took him into their hearts and homes and made him feel welcome for the first time since he had arrived in America. Mr Schlez knew that he had found the place where he wanted to stay.

Mr Schlez, a gifted carpenter, built his theater himself, as well as the benches inside for the movie-goers to sit on. He built it on Elm Street, and it still stands today, directly behind the Ben Franklin store. He also built his house himself, also on Elm Street, next door to his theater. He had a partner in the movie business, Mr W.T. Reynolds. They bought the property on which they built the theater from Mrs Martha Alexander and her two sons Vance and Charlie Alexander.

The first picture, shown, about 1914 or 1915, was 'Daddy Long Legs' starring Mary Pickford. They were silent pictures in those days, and music was furnished by a self-playing piano operated by Esta Mae Davis. Mr Schlez ran the reel and Mr Reynolds took up tickets. The newer building on Main Street was build about 1929. Matinees were added, as well as an everynight weekly performance. Also added, when they came into being nationally, was the soundtrack. It was an extra fine theater for a town the size of Columbia.

Today most of the men and women who remember Fred Schlez remember him as Fred Schlitz because his favorite beer was Schlitz beer and that became his nickname!

He didn't apply for citizenship papers until after the first world war was over. His reasons, as recalled by Mrs Blanche Cohoon, were: 'I was an alien. I entered this country illegally without any sponsorship. I was afraid the government would deport me back to Germany where I would be listed as a deserter and killed. I had some bad moments. Germany was at war and when the United States joined the Allies against Germany it meant prison camp here for the duration. My plan was to lay low, work hard, and refrain from doing anything that might cause suspicion. I had been here long enough that most of the people knew me, so I took the chance. There were a few who expressed doubt about me. I understood. Had the situation been reversed I probably would have felt as they did.'

When the war was over and things were back to normal, he applied for and got his US citizenship papers.

When Hitler's forces marched into Poland to begin World War II on September 1, 1939, Mr Schléz was a very unhappy man. He had many relatives still living in Germany and he was worried about them. He told Mrs Cohoon, 'I know now, with a mad man in charge over there, I shall never see them again.' He had a yearning to go back to his native land for a visit. He never made that trip.

John Frederick Schlez died of cancer on December 23, 1942, at age 53. He was buried in Oakwood Cemetery located just outside of Columbia.

He loved Tyrrell County and proved to be an upright citizen, interested in progress. He furnished wholesome entertainment for the youth of Tyrrell County, he was an artisan in wood construction and artistry, and he was a hard worker.

The Columbia Theater  
advertised the following  
program for the week of May 29  
to June 4th, 1936: Friday &  
Saturday, May 29-30: Buck Jones  
in 'Silver Spurs;' Tuesday, June  
2nd: Margaret Sullavan in 'Next  
Time We Love;' Thursday, June  
4th: Barton McLane in 'The Man  
of Iron.' Forthcoming attractions  
for June were: 'Captain Blood,'  
'Transatlantic Tunnell,' 'The  
Ghost Goes West,' 'Colleen,'  
'Strike Me Pink,' and 'Mr Hoho.'