

The Theater Men of Fairmont - Billy Hay & W.L. Nicholas

Fairmont has seen quite a number of movie theaters in its history. Those movie houses of the past included the Haynic, the Strand Theater, the Lake Theater, the Nicholas Theater, the Fair Mall Cinema, the Family Drive-In, and today we have the Five Lakes Cinema. However, the pioneers of this industry in Fairmont, namely Billy Hay and W. L. Nicholas, made their mark on Martin County in more ways than just promoting movies and their theater business.

Both Billy Hay and Willie Lincoln Nicholas had a number of things in common. They were born in England, both eventually became residents of Fairmont and Martin County, both had an interest in the theater business, and both were considered honorable and well respected citizens of this community as well as being very civic minded.

The headline in the December 9, 1926 edition of the *Sentinel* read as follows: "Billy Hay Drops Dead – Theater Man, Loved Citizen, Dies Suddenly."

Mr. Hay came to America from England at the age of eighteen. He originally settled with other English colonists in the Rose Lake area and later moved to Fairmont.

During the forty-eight years Billy Hay lived in Martin County, he was active in a number of endeavors. He farmed in Fairmont Township, he was a bookkeeper for Ward Implement Company, he was an abstractor for H. W. Sinclair Company, he was treasurer for Fairmont Railway Motors, Inc., he served on the Fairmont City Park Board for sixteen years, he was a member of the Fairmont Heating Commission for six years, he served as secretary of the Fairmont Cemetery Association for twenty-five years, and he was in the theater business which eventually became his life's work. It's obvious he was interested in more than his personal gain.

Billy Hay and W. L. Nicholas formed a partnership in 1912 when they opened the Haynic Theater, which had previously operated as the Fairmont Opera House. In 1915 they purchased the Strand Theater and later purchased all remaining shares of the Fairmont Opera House.

Willie Lincoln Nicholas was born in Bridgewater, Somersetshire, England, in 1874. Nicholas' father named him for the young son of Abraham Lincoln, whom he deeply admired, who died while Lincoln was in office. According to the August 8, 1947, edition of the *Sentinel*, he was admirably known as "Linc" to his many friends and acquaintances. In 1889 his father, a cabinet maker, brought his family to America a second time, settling near Emmetsburg, Iowa. While in Emmetsburg, Nicholas attended school and later took a position with the American Investment Company of Emmetsburg. He worked there until 1895 when he moved to Fairmont.

When Nicholas moved to Fairmont, he worked for the Martin County National Bank. In 1897, he was appointed as a Court Reporter for the Seventeenth Judicial District. He continued in this position until 1922 when he resigned to devote his attention to the moving picture business which he and Billy Hay developed during their partnership.

Being a civic minded individual, as well as having an ardent interest in Fairmont's parks, Nicholas agreed to serve as Chairman of the Park Board for several years. He was also elected Alderman, and then Mayor of Fairmont in 1935. While serving as Mayor, the city's parks remained his special interest. During his tenure as mayor, Mrs. Nicholas donated a substantial amount of land to Lincoln Park as well as funding a shelter house for the park.

Nicholas also had a keen interest in politics. He served as chairman of the Martin County Republican Central Committee from 1933-1945. He was also past Commander of The Knights of Pythias, was a charter member of Kiwanis, and he was a member of a number of fraternal and civic organizations locally, statewide, and nationally.

The August 8, 1947, edition of the *Sentinel* stated the following in a city council tribute to Nicholas upon his death: "No man who has held office in the City of Fairmont contributed more generously of his time and effort toward the betterment of the city than did the deceased during his tenure of office. He was also generous in his contributions to the churches and other civic organizations."

In conducting research about these individuals, it's especially interesting to read newspaper accounts of their lives. A *Sentinel* article from August 8, 1947, stated the following: "Fairmont never had a better, more useful citizen," in reference to Mr. Nicholas. Concerning Mr. Hay, another *Sentinel* article dated December 9, 1926, stated this: "Few citizens of Fairmont were as beloved and respected as Mr. Hay, whose long career here is without blemish. Truly, he was everybody's friend." Billy Hay passed away in 1926 at the age of sixty-six while shoveling snow at his home.

There is little doubt that the contributions of both W. L. Nicholas and Billy Hay to Fairmont and Martin County were significant. Yet, considering the many hardy individuals that helped to shape our city and county, it is even more interesting to note the public recognition, respect, and literal adoration bestowed upon many of them for their accomplishments and civic contributions. Those pioneering spirits of the last one hundred-fifty years were really more than merely businessmen or farmers seeking to advance their personal wealth and well being. They seem to have been truly representative of the quintessential spirit of what our country represents, namely, going beyond personal gain and gratification to serve the best interests of all mankind. Billy Hay and W. L. Nicholas would appear to represent the embodiment of positive character traits relative to their lives and community involvement. This is perhaps in stark contrast to some in today's world, whether CEO's or in other capacities, frequently mentioned in the media who apparently seem to seek personal status and wealth at the expense of the average citizen.

For more information about this topic and the history of Martin County, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.