

MARGULIES
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"...and this is my Lamaze coach..."

Serious moviegoers despise obnoxious, fidgety audiences

What happened?

When I was a kid, an unwritten rule of going to the movies was that you didn't make unnecessary noise in the theater. In my family that meant no talking, no fidgeting, no obnoxious popcorn crunching, no kicking the chair in front of you, no humming along with the theme music, etc.

Any violator of these sacred rules would be immediately:

a.) Smacked in mid-sentence.

b.) Rushed outside for a stern lecture. (i.e. "How would you like it if people came over to your house and talked while you were watching Hercules? Huh? Huh?")

c.) Arrested by the F.B.I.

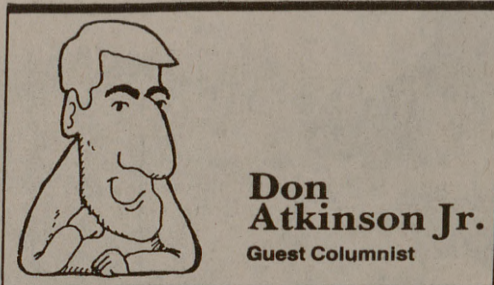
As I became older and realized that the "sacred rules" were really just common sense and good manners, I discovered that most audiences were fairly quiet as well. Any person in the theater who talked loudly and continuously was immediately asked by either an audience member or the manager to quiet down since it was disturbing to others.

Fortunately not many people had to be told to behave because it was understood by audience members all across the nation that the theater was a special place. When you walked into a theater and sat down, it may have seemed like just any other building. But when the lights went down and the curtains opened, you and the people around you were transported away to an imaginary world in which anything could happen. Consequently, any noise or reminder of the real world would ruin the fantasy.

But then things began to change.

It happened so slowly at first that I hardly noticed it. More and more I would go to see a movie, trying my best to obey the sacred rules set down by generations before me, only to end up next to some goober who couldn't seem to sit still long enough to watch the movie.

As the years went by, the sacred rules vanished altogether. Audiences now kicked chairs, chomped popcorn, talked loudly, hummed along to the theme music and fell asleep with a reckless abandon I had never seen before.



Don Atkinson Jr.
Guest Columnist

Eventually I got to the point where I wouldn't go see a movie unless it was something I just couldn't wait for. I have found that watching movies on my VCR is much more enjoyable than seeing them in a theater. It's a lot quieter, I can pause it if I need to and it doesn't cost half as much as going to the theater.

But what I can't understand is, what happened in the first place? Why are movie audiences today so unlike the ones I grew up with?

Well, just like everything else, the answer is not that simple. In fact, the answer requires a slight history lesson.

In the beginning, there were movies. Then along came the television set which was fruitful and multiplied. In the years that followed, movies and television existed side by side.

But then one day, a man came into the Garden Of Entertainment with a new idea called Home Box Office. Now people could stay at home and watch movies instead of going to the theater.

Understandably ticked, the movie people responded by making the movies more spectacular. Screens became bigger, sound got better and popcorn went up in price.

Things seemed to be OK again. Movies, television and Home Box Office had learned to exist together in peace and harmony.

But then the movie people noticed they could make more money by appealing to younger audiences. The result was THE TEEN FLICK!!!

Young people flocked to their local theaters to watch great quantities of sex, violence, bad language and food fights. Older people flocked in the opposite direction.

Shortly after this, the video-cassette recorder (VCR) dropped in price

enough to where almost everyone could buy them.

This was promptly followed by the creation of thousands of cable channels, the result being that people like me, people who respect the sacred rules, could now stay at home with our VCRs and "The Days And Nights Of Molly Dodd" on the Lifetime network.

Now that the history lesson is over, the question still remains: Why are today's audiences so obnoxious?

The answer, or at least the best answer I can give, is that movie theaters now cater to an entirely different audience.

Since the introduction of Home Box Office, the VCR and the thousands of cable networks, people have become used to feeling right at home in front of a movie. At home it is OK to talk as loud as you like, to make as much noise as possible and to kick the chair in front of you.

And, since movies are now aimed at younger audiences, there are less adults and more children going to the theaters. Without adults, the sacred rules cannot possibly be enforced.

With the new technologies looming on the horizon for television, it would be my guess that the movie theater stands a good chance of going the way of the drive-in.

Considering the zoo that theaters have become, I can't help but look forward to the day when I can watch movies in the privacy of my own home with all the advantages of a larger screen and better sound.

Don Atkinson is a senior journalism major and a cartoonist for The Battalion.

Personality plays role in political outcomes

Here in Realityville, there's a particularly fine example of how personality influences the outcome of political struggles taking shape under the Capitol dome. At issue — though settlement seems to be at hand — is the fate of workers comp in this state, and a critical factor in how it will all turn out is the personality of one man.



Molly Ivins
Syndicated Columnist

The fellow in question is Rep. Richard Smith, Republican of Bryan, not a bad fellow and not a stupid fellow either. Smith, who is chairman of the Public Safety Committee, did not have much background in workers comp — he's not a lawyer, he's not on Labor or Insurance. But, according to the Speaker's office, "he expressed an interest in playing a role on the issue" and so Gib Lewis made him the House chair of the interim committee that studied the problem of workers comp, and that gave him a year or so to learn the field. And he really worked at it, read everything, talked to everybody, studied.

Sometimes you give a backbencher like Smith — some guy in his third term or so who's never done much to write home about — a big assignment like that, carrying the most important bill of the session, and he'll suddenly blossom. Given a chance to star, to do something that will really make a difference in people's lives, some legislators who have been loafing along will really take hold and display all kinds of heretofore unsuspected abilities. It didn't quite happen with Smith.

Smith's first mistake was to lose the moral high ground by writing a bill that appeared to include a fat piece of pork barrel for his own district. There was a clause in there setting up a special Center for the Study of Workers Comp at — guess what?! — Texas A&M University, folks, right next door to Bryan. This caused veteran opponents of pork like the Unspeakable Hollowell of Grand Saline (the social utility of Hollowell surfaces every now and then) to have conviction fits, and it was taken out. So here's Smith, who's carrying the ball for business, already looking like a greedy pig.

Actually, all the proposed research center at A&M did was to formalize an arrangement that already existed whereby A&M has a contract with the Industrial Accident Board to study the system: It's not a bad idea to have a continuing outside audit of workers comp — it's one of those deals you have to keep adjusting as you go along or it will get seriously out of whack — as it is now. But it looked real bad and was a tactical blunder.

The legislative politics on the issue were pretty simple — the House is safety pro-business, while the Senate is either more pro-worker or pro-lawyer, depending on who you listen to. Smith

compounded his problem by frequently appearing disingenuous. Less than frank. He may not be. But he often confused and defensive.

The uncharitable interpretation of this is that he's ignorant. The charitable interpretation is that he has an inferiority complex about being the only lawyer dealing with the complex. Sometimes he seized on bad information if it appeared to bolster his position. Senators who don't know him will write this down to duplicity.

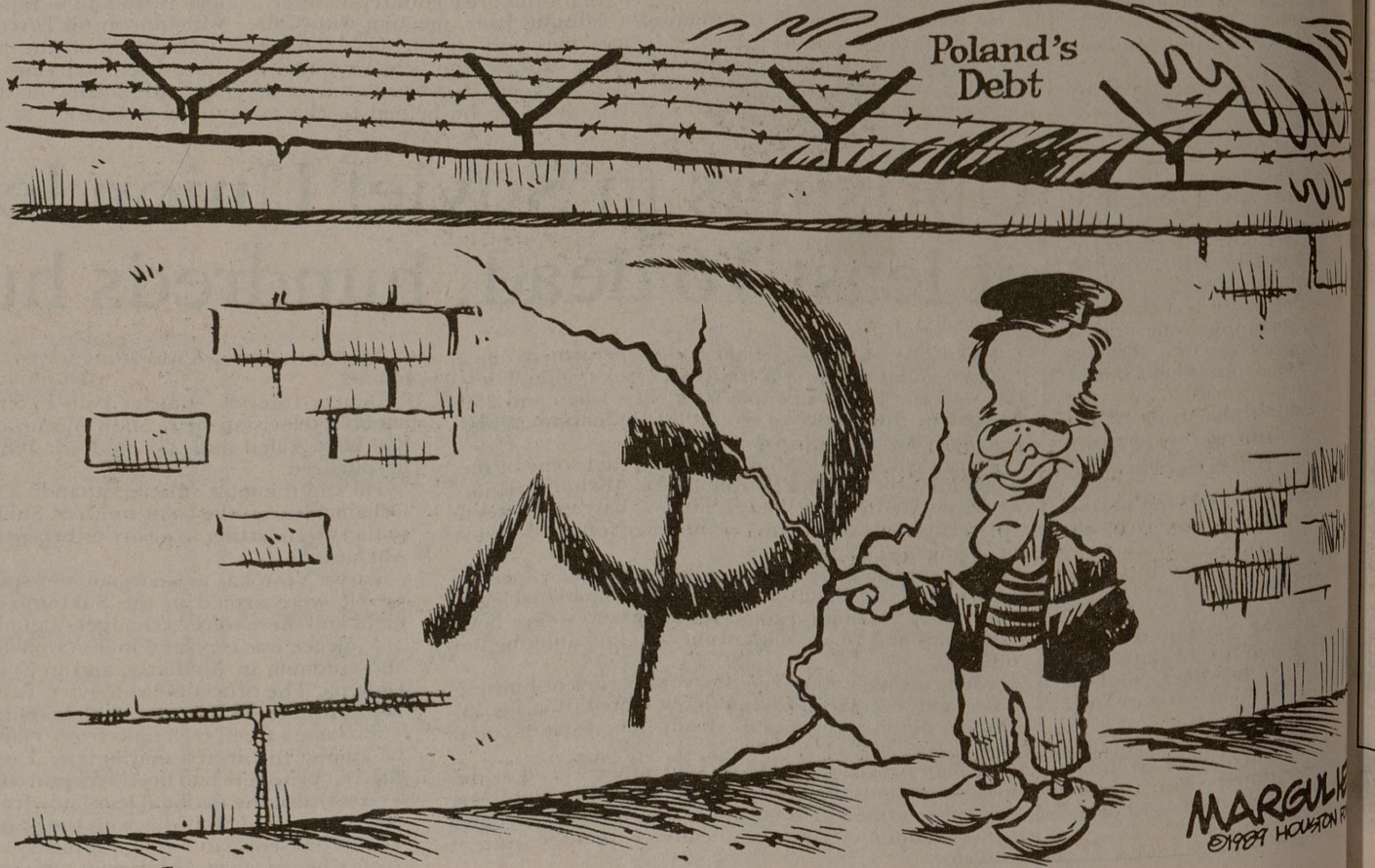
Smith who is in real estate and investments in Bryan, is considered extensible by those who know him and also sincere in his desire to fix the workers comp system. But he was so afraid of getting "pencil-whipped" by the lawyers, afraid each proposed change contained some secret loophole he couldn't spot, that he was suspicious, defensive and difficult during negotiations.

The only lawyer on the House conference committee is Steve Wolenski of Dallas, probably one of the smartest House members in sheer IQ, but Wolenski is a trial lawyer himself, which is his forte on the Senate side of the House side. The Senate sent five lawyers into conference from their side. Smith was nervous and defensive the time the Senate proposed a change had to scurry out of the room to confer with his own lawyers.

Smith also blundered a couple of times in ways that made the other side consider him untrustworthy — at one point his bill halved the compensation for widows of workers killed on the job. After the AFL-CIO indignantly called a press conference to point this out, Smith claimed "oops," it was just a mistake, little oversight there, heh, heh. No matter what his motivation, he then looked like either a dimwit or a cheat — all, picking on widows is not good PR.

He got his bill through the House masterfully — of course, he started with a lot of high cards in his hand — but did not shine during negotiations with the Senate.

The saga of Richard Smith and his workers comp bill, which may be mercifully over to an end, is more of a sad story than anything else. He misplayed a strong hand and emerges, despite all his hard work on the issue, with his political credit diminished. And it wasn't a bunch of "smart lawyers" who did him in — he did it himself.



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