

The Kiddy Show

By Dennis Knight

I was in high school over 50 years ago when I got my job as an usher at the Fox Theater in Laramie. Soon I became a doorman and I learned to handle the ticket booth, help at the concession stand, change the marquee, and do just about anything at the movies but run the projector.

Our manager hated kids but loved seeing them in the seats and selling them candy and popcorn, so he scheduled a series of kiddy shows for Wednesday afternoons in the summer. I was appointed master of ceremonies. My mom proudly clipped the ads from the Laramie Daily Boomerang proclaiming "Uncle Dennis on Stage!"

I prepared my debut in the enthusiasm of the ham that I was then and still am. We lined up a double feature with lots of cartoons and a fifteen minute break in the action for my stage appearance. The boss let me buy a few prizes from the dime store, things like paddle balls and jacks. My usher's uniform with the gold trim gave me the look of a teenaged Captain Kangaroo. I even wrote a theme song which I have never forgotten but will spare you today.

Laramie High, like high schools everywhere, had an association for the jocks; ours was the L Club. As a journalism guy I reported on their athletic exploits and envied their attraction for the pretty girls. I wasn't thinking about the L Club on the day of my debut as Uncle Dennis, but as it happened, that was the day they picked to treat the children from the orphanage to an afternoon at the movies.

The theater opened with a long line at the box office. Only slightly nervous, I began the process of greeting each child, taking their tickets in efficient but grand ceremony. But then to my surprise the football team showed up, each of them with an orphan in tow. As they came in my bluster evaporated and my butterflies rose up in a sense of pending self-humiliation. My high school career was doomed.

The first movie and some cartoons ran while I sweated in the air conditioning. Finally, I took the stage. I had to take the stage. The lights were turned up but didn't do their job of blinding me. I heard the reception of 500 happy kids but saw only the ominous eyes of a defensive line, offensive line, assorted backfields and the star quarterback.

I didn't know whether to sing my song, but I swallowed and did it. Badly, but I did it. I brought kids on stage to play games for prizes, and had a good time in general. We filled the time allotted so I was happily eliminated my second song, a sing-along to Do-Re-Mi from The Sound of Music.

The rest of the summer at the theater passed with movies, cartoons, contests and Uncle Dennis on stage, but I abandoned the theme song. September came, school resumed, the football season started, and I got exactly the response I wanted from the L Club, which was that nobody said a word. The manager decided to continue with me on stage on Saturdays, and I would still be doing the kiddy show today if I hadn't joined the Army.