

The POP Heard 'Round the World: How Popcorn Was A Turning Point In Movie Theater History And

American Society

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Senior Division

Individual Performance

Word Count: 499

### Process Paper:

I wanted to base my NHD topic on local history since I would be more aware of its impact; I also have easy access to valuable resources when researching, like the Carmel Clay Historical Society and the Indiana Historical Society. Therefore, I initially chose my topic area by looking up what Indiana was known for, and while researching, I found that Indiana was the nation's leading popcorn producer. The founder of the world's biggest popcorn brand, Orville Redenbacher, was also a Hoosier. It was clear that popcorn has a rich history in Indiana and currently plays a pivotal role in its economy, leading to my area of research.

A source that was instrumental in the construction of my project was the book *Popped Culture* by Andrew Smith. It provided a detailed description of popcorn's social influence in American society from 9,000 years ago to the present day. The book was valuable to my research because it had many primary sources, acting as my database for popcorn information. The biggest difficulty I encountered while researching was finding historical sources relating to my topic, but this book provided countless periodicals I could utilize. Another source that provided value to my project was from the USDA. Each year, they publish the agricultural output and profit of different crops in states. Although *Popped Culture* eloquently described the societal impact popcorn had, these numbers provided tangible evidence of the impact popcorn has in America, adding a layer of depth to my project.

When deciding the format of my performance, I considered how to incorporate both the short and long-term effects my turning point had naturally. By starting as a modern TV show host, I could give a brief overview of the current impact of my turning point. I then transitioned to a host from 1959, where I could develop the events that led up to the turning point and the immediate short-term effects it had on the economy and society. I would then incorporate the differing perspectives regarding popcorn at the time through newspapers and interviews. Afterward, I would return to being a modern host and end the performance by explaining the long-term impact of my topic. This way, I could still give an engaging presentation while maintaining my historical argument and its value.

Popcorn was banned from the movies before the Great Depression. During this time, films were only shown at movie palaces and catered to a higher-class audience, meaning the audience and palace owners viewed popcorn as a lower-class food that should not be associated with these venues. However, after the Great Depression, watching films became an accessible pastime for all social classes, and the theater industry was saved by concession revenues due to the introduction of popcorn into American movie theaters, becoming a turning point in economic and social history. Popcorn is now a food found in every movie theater across the nation, and the movies are a place for every family and person to enjoy, not just upper-class Americans.

## Annotated Bibliography:

### Primary Sources:

Bartlett, Arthur. "Popcorn Crazy." *Saturday Evening Post*. 221. 12 May 1949. 36.

This source informed me of the different mindsets people had about the introduction of popcorn into movie theaters, specifically the fact that theater owners believed concessions to be "beneath their dignity", helping develop the differing perspectives of my project. I also reference this specific line when mentioning the interview with a former palace owner.

Behymer, Alvin. "Popcorn Crop Major Business at Shawneetown; Newspaper Pays Tribute to George Atkins." *Popcorn Merchandiser* 4. March 1950. 36-38.

This source provided a primary anecdote of a movie theater owner who accepted the sale of popcorn in his venue. Although I did not include the specific story in my performance, this source informed me that theaters that introduced popcorn into their theaters fared much better than those that didn't during the Depression, adding to the value of my turning point and strengthening my thesis.

*Boxoffice*. 54. 7 May 1949. 37.

This source detailed when the Oregon legislature proposed banning the sale of popcorn in movie theaters which I mention as a backlash my turning point faced in history. This article explained different ways the public reacted to popcorn, with the bill being an example, adding to the differing perspectives of my project.

"Front cover of Hybrid Popcorn in Indiana." Purdue University Agricultural Experiment Station. *Special Collections, USDA National Agricultural Library*. 1946.

<https://www.nal.usda.gov/exhibits/speccoll/items/show/462>.

I used this image in my performance to serve as a transition from the modern TV host to the 1959 playback. Its presence helps establish a local connection of my topic to Indiana and adds a visual for the audience.

Geauga Record [Chardon, Geauga County, Ohio], 14 June 1956. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Library of Congress.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84028102/1956-06-14/ed-1/seq-10/>. Accessed 12 May 2024.

This source gave a primary account of the profitability of popcorn. I added this image to the newspaper I read when talking about the movie palace owner's opinion on popcorn in movie palaces as a detail that adds to the performance and quality of my project.

Harder, Connie. "Popcorn Merchandiser." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, December 21st, 1951. P. 43.

This source gave the statistic about 96% of a survey of 23,000 theaters sold popcorn, earning a total of \$193 million, supporting the economic impact my turning point had. This statistic put into perspective just how impactful popcorn was on the movie theater industry and supported my thesis regarding the historical significance of my topic.

Highsmith, Carol M, photographer. *Lobby chandelier at the Landmark Theatre in Syracuse, New York*. The Landmark, designed by Thomas W. Lamb, opened in. -07-21. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <[www.loc.gov/item/2018700158/](http://www.loc.gov/item/2018700158/)>. Accessed 17 April 2024.

This is a photo of a movie palace that I use in my performance. This image visually displays the extravagance of movie palaces and allows the viewer to further understand why these places only catered to wealthier Americans, adding to the differing perspectives within my project.

Highsmith, Carol M, photographer. Marquee of the El Capitan, a restored movie palace on Hollywood Boulevard in the Hollywood neighborhood of Los Angeles, California. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <[www.loc.gov/item/2013631467/](http://www.loc.gov/item/2013631467/)>. Accessed 17 April 2024.

This is another photo I used in my performance on one of my prop boards. The bright led lights in front of the movie palace contrast with the dull popcorn stands, showing the disparity between upper and lower-class citizens, adding to my project's multiple perspectives.

Highsmith, Carol M, photographer. *Stand-alone marquee for the Weirs drive-in movie theater in Weirs Beach, New Hampshire. -09-22*. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <[www.loc.gov/item/2017884960/](http://www.loc.gov/item/2017884960/)>. Accessed 17 April 2024.

This photo of a drive-in movie theater shows its simplicity, standing in stark contrast to images I showed earlier in my performance of movie palaces. Although these buildings look much less glamorous, they represent how the movies began growing to become more accessible for the average American, adding to the impact of my turning point and its significance.

Kahle, Roger, and Lee, Robert. *Popcorn and Parable: A New Look at the Movies*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House. 1971. 9-15.

This source gave me insight into the public perception of movie palaces before the Great Depression and how the introduction of sound expanded the audience of these establishments. I discovered that this development was one of the main contributors to the movies becoming more accessible, allowing for popcorn to eventually be also added to movie theaters, adding historical context to my project.

Lane, Kit. "The Popcorn Millionaire and Other Tales of Saugatuck." *Chicago Tribune*, 1991, 52.

This source detailed how popcorn vendors were sometimes immensely wealthy and provided insight into the short-term impact of popcorn in theaters after the Depression. It details stories of numerous

Americans gaining massive sums of cash through popcorn sales, strengthening the economic impact my turning point had and supporting my thesis.

McQueeney, Steve. "How the Glenn W. Dickson Theatre Circuit Found New Profits in Lobby Shops."

*Better Theatre*. 4 March 1939. 3.

This source provided insight into the logistical problems surrounding popcorn in movie theaters and why some managers thought adding a concession stand would not be economically sound, adding differing perspectives to my project. These perspectives added complexity to my project and helped me explore both the benefits and downsides of my turning point.

"Popcorn Bonanza: Fans Are Eating Movie Exhibitions Out of the Red," *Life*, 27. July, 1949.

This source explained how by 1949, the biggest attraction in theaters was not the movies but popcorn. Due to this nationwide obsession with popcorn, many theaters were able to survive the economic hardship faced during the Depression and even thrive afterward, adding credibility to my argument that my turning point had a huge economic impact.

Rothstein, Arthur, photographer. *Popcorn stand, Chillicothe, Ohio*. Feb. 1939. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <[www.loc.gov/item/2017726705/](http://www.loc.gov/item/2017726705/)>. Accessed 16 February 2024.

I used this photo of a popcorn stand on a poster board as a visual indicator that showed the audience what new popcorn technology looked like, adding historical context to my project.

Rothstein, Arthur, photographer. *Popcorn stand. Johnston City, Illinois*. Jan. 1939. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <[www.loc.gov/item/2017777195/](http://www.loc.gov/item/2017777195/)>. Accessed 16 February 2024.

I used this photo of a popcorn and peanut stand to show what popcorn stands looked like during the turning point in my performance, adding to the historical context of my project.

Wilson, Kemmons. *Half Luck and Half Brains: The Kemmons Wilson Holiday Inn Story*. Memphis: Hambleton-Hill Publishing. 1996. 15-16.

This source details the story of Kemmons Wilson, the founder of Holiday Inn, whose first popcorn-selling job was eventually taken from him by the venue owner because it was so profitable. This source provides a primary story of how popcorn impacted everyday people, adding the perspective of lower-class Americans to my topic.

### **Secondary Sources:**

Avey Tori. "Popcorn: A 'Pop' History." *PBS*, 29. October 2013.

<https://www.pbs.org/food/the-history-kitchen/popcorn-history/>. Accessed 1 February 2024.

I used this source to learn how popcorn's status in American society has changed. It dived into how popcorn is known across the nation as a movie theater food and how it has adapted in other aspects, like its role as a health food. Learning about this helped me understand the long-term impact popcorn has had, which I reiterate in my conclusion.

Eschner, Kat. "Movie Palaces Let Everyday Americans Be Royalty." *Smithsonian Magazine*.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/movie-palaces-let-everyday-americans-be-royalty-180962824/>. Accessed 18 February 2024.

This source provided insight into the history of movie palaces and how they eventually declined in popularity. Since movie palaces are a part of my turning point's historical context, it is important to learn about their background. This source also explains how movie palaces were meant to mimic classical opera, allowing me to explain why they catered to upper-class Americans and created differing perspectives.

Pellot, Emerald. "Finance expert explains how movie theaters actually make money: 'I was shocked to find out'." *Yahoo Life*,



[https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/finance-expert-explains-movie-theaters-203601319.html?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAAHDoRWGApwZsxOE\\_s97yWAKuE3KMY3G8DEqMvsVJKyCGidXkVSroXC5o-itUE7lt\\_HFNJvYXhx4UXVo9w3IFehommGtfcWNyyc\\_DabMDdQ3vlNXVQ2aEtKg1dJcqxJrZsX1SWMPWyQBP3nm3NGSGy\\_nXVtmQaFVLqppf3QeUvc4X](https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/finance-expert-explains-movie-theaters-203601319.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAHDoRWGApwZsxOE_s97yWAKuE3KMY3G8DEqMvsVJKyCGidXkVSroXC5o-itUE7lt_HFNJvYXhx4UXVo9w3IFehommGtfcWNyyc_DabMDdQ3vlNXVQ2aEtKg1dJcqxJrZsX1SWMPWyQBP3nm3NGSGy_nXVtmQaFVLqppf3QeUvc4X). Accessed February 16 2024.

This source gave me the statistic that some theaters earn as much as 80% of their revenue through concession sales alone. I utilized this knowledge to argue the current economic impact my turning point still holds in theaters today, supporting my thesis that the introduction of popcorn into movie theaters was indeed an impactful moment in American history.

“Purdue Profiles: Orville Redenbacher History of Popcorn.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Purdue. 27 October 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_DY4gsNjAao](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_DY4gsNjAao).

This source informed me about Orville Redenbacher and his story regarding his life and the popcorn brand. Learning about him helps establish a local connection in my project and signifies popcorn's impact as it allows people like Orville to gain nationwide fame.

Purdue University College of Agriculture. *National Agricultural Statistics Service Indiana Field Office*. United States Department of Agriculture, 2022, [https://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/Indiana/index.php](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Indiana/index.php). Accessed 15 February 2024.

This source provided statistics regarding Indiana's popcorn output, displaying evidence for the significance and impact popcorn has on the economy. I used these statistics to both establish a local connection and state popcorn's modern impact.

Smith, Andrew. *Popped Culture: A Social History Of Popcorn In America*. Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001.

This source provided an in-depth analysis of popcorn's role in American society from its origins to its modern-day impact. It also utilized numerous primary sources I could access through this book and later used in my performance.

Smith, Andrew. "Why do we eat popcorn at the movies?" *YouTube*, uploaded by Ted-ed. 20 April 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5EsICTVo2dM&t=232s>.

This source provided a general overview of popcorn history. I used it as a starting point to conduct my research, and it gave me the idea to study the introduction of popcorn into movie theaters as my turning point.

"The History of Drive-In Movie Theaters (And Where They Are Now)." *New York Film Academy*, 27 May. 2023, <https://www.nyfa.edu/student-resources/the-history-of-drive-in-movie-theaters-and-where-they-are-now/>. Accessed 26 February 2024.

This source informed me of the increase in more accessible movie options, like drive-in theaters. I used this development to argue the social value of my turning point in that it encouraged the development of less rigid establishments that catered to everyone, not just rich Americans.