

Applewhite, Jan: Theater of Dreams ^[1]

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Jan Applewhite: Theater of Dreams

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 1/13/2002. Copyrighted.
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In the glow of Hollywood's Golden Age in the 1930s and '40s, Jan Applewhite was among the farming people who flocked to the first movie theaters in Eastern North Carolina. Weary of the Great Depression, they crowded into small-town theaters eager to see a different world, more sophisticated, charming and romantic than a tobacco field. Many of those farmers fought tooth and nail to hold onto their land in the face of mechanization, world markets and federal farm policies that forced them to "get big or get out." But during my visit to her home in Durham County, Jan Applewhite -- mother, homemaker, artist, old movie lover (and wife of poet James Applewhite) -- reminded me that many others of her generation yearned desperately for a life beyond the farm, one that they often saw first in Hollywood movies.

In Jan Applewhite's words:

I was born in my grandmother's house on a little dirt road about three miles from Vanceboro. My mother and father were both the babies from large families, so most of the other siblings got larger bits of the farm. They had a very small farm, I wanted to get away from that world. That world never seemed to change. They were only interested in their community. They talked about the farm, the family and the church, and that was it. And often it was not a kind world. It was very hard. All during the '30s and '40s, we went to the movies two and three times a week. We'd go at night on Tuesdays and Thursdays and to the matinee on Saturday. The theater was a little cinder-block building right there on the main street as you know it. I loved all the movies -- "Flying Down to Rio," Myrna Loy movies, Clark Gable movies, musicals. I even had sort of a fantasy, a daydream, that I would have a musical in the tobacco barn. The tobacco barn was going to be the stage, and, of course, we'd go every Saturday for sure. That's when we saw the Westerns. First, you'd get the news, especially during World War II. Then you had the serials. Oh, they were fun! They would be more like 15 or 20 minutes long. Most of the serials were fun, but they didn't have the star power. They didn't feature the well-known actors like Johnny Mack Brown or Gene Autry. You'd see the serial on Saturday, and on Tuesdays and Thursdays before the show you might see "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer." My mother and my father would go, and we would often take one of my cousins. Both their parents were very strictly religious and would not go to the movies themselves, but they would allow their children -- my cousins -- to go with us. My grandfather, in my mother's day, they didn't have time for movies. They truly did not. The washing had to be done by hand. The cooking had to be done on a wood stove. The canning had to be done in the summertime, the killing of hogs in January. To live in that world, my mother was made to feel that if you were sitting down reading, you were wasting time. To this day, she cannot read in the daytime or she feels like she's malingering. I guess that's part of why it was sinful, because nothing came out of it except the movies. In the '30s, the movies had this ideal of sophistication and high culture that I loved. It was an escape from the Depression, of course. In those movies money was no problem. Everybody had money and wore fine clothes, satins and silks. That's the way the movies were how I imagined I wanted my life to be. But perhaps that's the way it is for all children. You have a dream for your life, and then you have most people's lives, which have problems and painful things and hurtful things. The movies were how I imagined I wanted my life to be.

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