

# The Warner Brothers

## Harry, Sam, Albert and Jack

### Film Pioneers and Movie Moguls from Youngstown and the Mahoning Valley



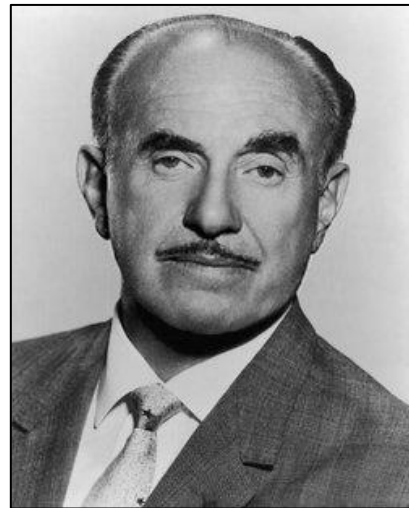
*Harry Warner 1881—1958  
(born Hirsz Wonskolaser)*



*Sam Warner 1885—1927  
(born Szmul Wonskolaser)*



*Albert Warner 1884-1967  
(born Aaron Wonskolaser)*



*Jack Warner 1892—1978  
(Itzhak/Jacob Wonskolaser)*

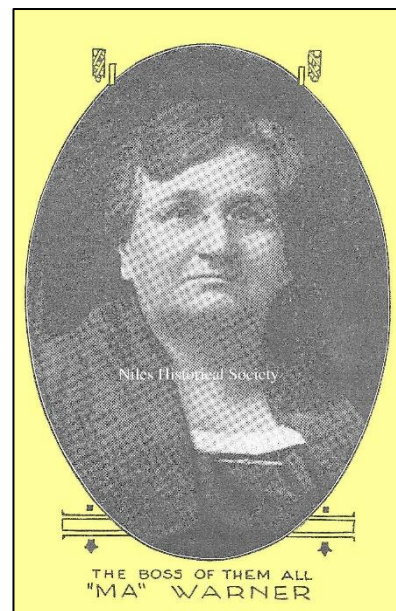
Long before the Warner brothers were Hollywood players, Sam, Albert, Harry, and Jack traveled across the Mahoning Valley showing movies. They opened their first theater in 1903 just across the Ohio state line in New Castle, Pennsylvania, before setting off for

Pittsburgh, New York and then, in 1917, California to make movies themselves.

Patriarch Benjamin Wonskolaser, a shoemaker from Krasnosieic, Poland, immigrated to the U.S. in 1887 and brought his wife Pearl Leah Eichelbaum and their extensive family to America in 1895 to escape Cossack persecution of Jews. In Krasnosielc, the family used many surnames: Wonsal, Wonsker, Wonskolaser, Woron, Wrona. First settling in Baltimore, the *Wonskolasers* became the Warners, where they had some initial success. From Baltimore, the family moved to Canada, where they experienced significant losses, when Benjamin became involved in the fur trading business. Then, in 1896, the family settled on Youngstown, Ohio's north side. Fifteen-year-old Harry and his father earned enough repairing shoes to secure a loan to open a meat counter and grocery store in the downtown area. In 1899, Harry opened a bicycle shop with his younger brother, Albert. In addition to repairing bicycles, the two brothers opened a bowling alley, which closed shortly after it opened.



Source: Niles Historical Society



Source: Niles Historical Society

Albert stayed in school longer than any of his three brothers, attending Youngstown's Rayen High School. After dropping out, he got a sales job in Chicago for the Swift Soap Company. Sam was drawn to adventure. Fascinated by traveling jugglers and artists performing at fairs, he decided to become one of them. Traveling from town to town, he worked successively as a snake charmer and a live shield in an egg-throwing contest as a target. When egg prices went up sharply, the stall owner replaced the eggs with hard baseballs. Badly bruised, Sam resigned from this job and then entered into a partnership with a young customer he met in the family bike shop. Together, they acted a "fate tempters," riding a bicycle down a ladder from a tower. After a few months, the partner died in a fatal accident

and Sam was once again forced to look for work. He was then employed as an assistant engine driver on the railway.

Even in running locomotive, Sam did not abandon his show business aspirations. During this time, Sam formed a business partnership with another Youngstown resident and "took over" the city's Old Grand Opera House, which he used as a venue for "cheap vaudeville and photoplays." That venture failed after one summer. Fifteen-year-old Sam then secured a job as a projectionist at a local amusement park, Idora Park. He persuaded his family of this new medium's possibilities, and was able to negotiate the purchase of a Model B Kinetoscope from the Idora Park projectionist. Along with the projector, a copy of the 1903 silent film *The Great Train Robbery* was included.

The first cinema was an old borrowed tent which the Warner brothers installed at the back of the house. To the displeasure of the neighbors, who began to be disturbed by the crowds and the noise, more and more people came to the screenings. When the police began to be called, the brothers decided to move the business to nearby Niles, Ohio. Today, it is regarded as the birthplace of Warner Brothers.

They didn't stay long in Niles, mainly because the city's safety inspector arrived for an inspection with a lighted cigar in his hand, causing an explosion that claimed his life. Fearing retribution from the deceased's family, the Warners packed up, and with stops in Steubenville, Girard, Warren, Meadville, made their way to New Castle, Pennsylvania. The reason for these frequent moves was the lack of a repertoire – they still only had one film.

This single copy and a portable projector provided work for three brothers and a sister. Rose sold tickets. Albert and Sam operated the machine, and the youngest of the siblings, Jack, entertained the audience with singing as the older brothers changed film reels.

In 1905, Harry agreed to join his two brothers and sold his Youngstown bicycle shop. With money from the sale, the three brothers were able to purchase a building in New Castle, Pennsylvania. Instead of moving from town to town, the brothers were able to open their first "real" cinema, which they proudly named *The Cascade Movie Palace*, on February 2, 1907. Referring to the place as a "palace" was a gross misnomer. Although the building's façade, with its Byzantine arches and Greek columns, was impressive, the inside was reportedly dirty and had an unpleasant smell.

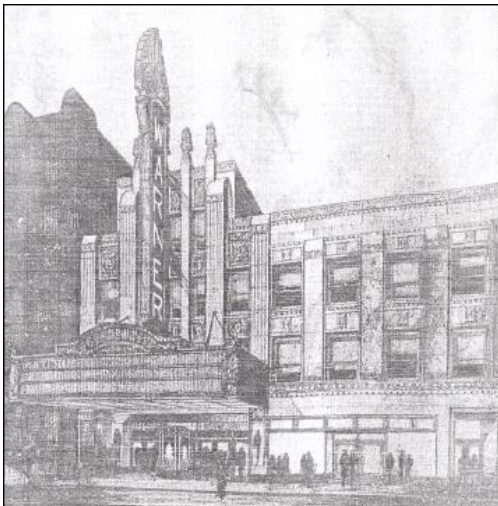
Nonetheless, *The Cascade* was so successful that the brothers were able to purchase a second theater named the *Bijou* in New Castle as well. As the company grew, the Warners came to the conclusion that the future lay not in owning cinemas but in film distribution. So, they sold both halls to move to Pittsburgh in the spring of 1907. There, they founded The Duquesne Amusement Supply Company – one of the first film distribution companies in the United States. Jack, then seventeen years old, joined his older brothers as a warehouseman with the title of "quality inspector."

Subsequently, the three brothers acquired fifteen additional theaters in Pennsylvania and located their movie business to Pittsburgh. Two years later, in 1909, the brothers sold the Cascade Theater for \$40,000, and decided to open a second movie distribution exchange in Norfolk, Virginia. This was when 18-year-old Jack officially joined his three brothers, serving as Sam's assistant in Norfolk.

Threatened by the exorbitant fees charged by the Edison Trust (eventually ended in 1915), the brothers sold the business in 1910 for \$52,000 and launched their own film production company. Harry and Albert set up offices in New York while Sam went to Los Angeles and Jack to San Francisco.

Their first major film followed their purchase of the rights to *My Four Years in Germany* on war-time atrocities in Germany. Profits from the film allowed them to set up a studio in Hollywood and they formally incorporated as Warner Brothers Pictures in 1923. During this period of silent film their biggest star was a dog, Rin Tin Tin, hero of a series of movies. In 1925, Sam urged the licensing of Western Electric's Vitaphone technology, to provide synchronized sound. Sadly, just before the release in 1927 of *The Jazz Singer*, the first major "talkie," Sam died of pneumonia.

Four years later, Youngstown's Warner Theatre (now known as the Powers Auditorium) had its grand opening in Sam's memory. The brothers spared no expense on the Warner Theatre, building the foyer to resemble the Palace of Versailles and paying \$75,000 for a Wurlitzer organ. The theatre was built in a lavish art deco style. After it closed in 1968, it was renovated and re-opened as Powers Auditorium, the home of the Youngstown Symphony. It is now part of the DeYor Performing Arts Center.



*The original Warner Theatre, which opened in 1931, cost \$1.5 million to build. The first movie shown at that time was "The Milionaire", and the final movie was "Bonnie and Clyde" in 1968.*

The profits fueled the success and growth of the Warner Brothers over the next three decades releasing scores of blockbuster films with actors and actresses like James Cagney, Errol Flynn, Humphrey Bogart, Bette Davis and Joan Blondell. Ronald Reagan got his start as an actor with Warner Brothers. As World War 2 approached they released films critical of the rising Nazi threat.

Sadly, in later life, the three brothers had a falling out over control of the studios. They agreed to sell the company in 1956, only for Jack to put together a syndicate that secured a controlling interest, appointing himself president. Harry and Jack were estranged and Jack did not attend Harry's funeral when he died in 1958. Albert, likewise, never spoke to his brother again, dying in 1967. Jack outlived them all, passing in 1978. By this time, the company had expanded into television and the recording industry. In more recent years, they've continued to expand into various entertainment media while maintaining a strong position in the film industry, including producing the *Harry Potter* films.

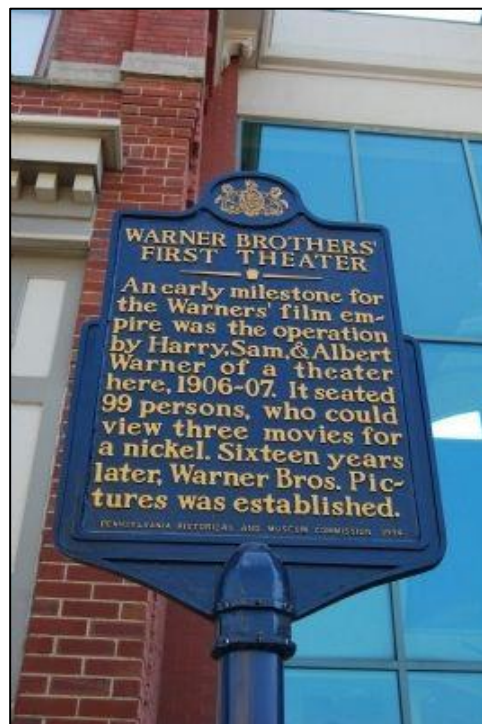
The Warner name and empire traces back to four brothers who got their start in entertainment and film in Youngstown and the Mahoning Valley, leaving a legacy of entertainment and cultural achievements that epitomize the American dream.

### Historic Milestone Markers in Ohio and Pennsylvania



Marker is in the median on West Federal Street in front of the DeYor Performing Arts Center – Youngstown, Ohio  
 Erected 2003 by Ohio Bicentennial Commission, Time Warner, and The Ohio Historical Society.  
 Source: The Historical Marker Database Photo credit: Mike Wintermantel.

Warner Brothers' First Theater  
 Cascade Picture Palace – New Castle, Pennsylvania  
 Erected 2014 by Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.  
 Source: The Historical Marker Database Photo credit: Mike Wintermantel.





## **More on The Warner Brothers**

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Gail Greenberg 12/26/2022  
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