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Section: Editorial

A hometown boy: ignored

I grew up in small town with only one operational movie theater -- the Apollo Theater, notable for a statue of the Greek god Apollo in the lobby. The Apollo didn't give us many movie options. As kids, this didn't matter much. As long as there was something to watch at the Saturday matinee, we were happy.

But as adolescents, we were more demanding and were frustrated by the fact that our movie choices were limited to one show each week.

The Apollo's screenings didn't improve when I reached high school, but the attainment of a driver's license created the opportunity to escape to other towns with more movie choices. Once, a friend named Charlie used his car to escape to the metropolis of Tulsa, Okla. He came back with stories about girls, fake IDs and near escapes from the police.

One of his stories was about a movie he saw. Charlie described a movie about a teenage boy obsessed with faking his own suicide. The boy falls in love with a woman over three times his age; they meet at a funeral. The plot didn't sound like any film we had ever seen before, so we figured Charlie was lying. After all, we knew that Charlie was lying about all his other exploits. Months later, I learned that Charlie was telling the truth -- at least about the movie. The movie he had seen was Hal Ashby's "Harold and Maude." It is now considered a comedy classic.

A couple of years later, I moved away from home to a college town with dozens of movie options. Having been deprived for so long, I was delighted by the abundance of film choices. Many of the films I saw were directed by Ashby. Ashby's credits as a director include: "The Last Detail," with Jack Nicholson; "Shampoo," the comedy with Warren Beatty, Julie Christie and Goldie Hawn; "Coming Home," a drama about the Vietnam War with Bruce Dern, Jane Fonda and Jon Voight; and "Being There," the last film to star Peter Sellers.

Ashby won an Oscar for his editing of "In the Heat of the Night." The American Film Institute selected two of Ashby's films, "Harold and Maude" and "Being There," to its list of the all-time best comedies. If you enjoy movies, you have probably seen one of Ashby's films. You may or may not know that Ashby is a native of Ogden, Utah. He was born in Ogden in 1929. His father was a dairy farmer, and Ashby was the youngest of four children. His father committed suicide when Ashby was a teenager. It is interesting that suicide plays a role in at least two of Ashby's films: "Harold and Maude" and "Coming Home."

Ashby dropped out of high school, traveled to California and eventually found a job operating a printing press at Universal Studios.

In a time when people delight in the most trivial type of celebrity, it is interesting that there is no notable marker in the city of Ogden to recognize Hal Ashby or his contribution to America cinema. Earlier this month, the Standard-Examiner carried an article about Marie Osmond, noting that she was born in Ogden. Orem, Utah, celebrates the fact that "Footloose" was filmed there. Many people know that the television series "Everwood" was shot on Ogden's 25th Street.

But, few people know of Ashby's connection to Ogden.

In a few weeks the Sundance Film Festival will come to Utah. Many of the Hollywood elite passing through our state will be well acquainted with Ashby's work.

At least some are likely to know of Ashby's connection to Ogden. As an example, Sean Penn dedicated his first film to Ashby.

Given his accomplishments, it is regrettable that Ashby's hometown does not recognize his contribution to American film.

It is unlikely that the city will erect a sign recognizing the place of Ashby's birth or to name a street after him. A more modest goal would be to place a small plaque honoring Ashby in the Egyptian Theater, perhaps on the back of a theater seat.

Maybe someday one of Ogden's theaters might show "Harold and Maude" as a midnight movie. I think that would be a fitting tribute to a hometown boy who contributed a lot to cinema.