



When I Think Back...

by Neville Williams

'Shadders on the wall' — the story of an old-time country picture show

There's another side to the slickly presented moving pictures which appear on cue between the velvet curtains of a modern urban cinema, with full colour, wide format and stereo sound. I have in mind the primitive, often makeshift conditions under which the weekly 'flicks' once used to be screened in country community halls.

Before taking up the above theme, I should perhaps offer a word of explanation about the title of this article:

Thirty or more years ago, while I was still occupying the editorial chair of this magazine, a youth from the country joined our laboratory staff — a pleasant, technically promising young man with the typically unhurried speech and dry humour of a 'bloke' from the bush.

One day, over morning tea, other men in the workshop were involved in a protracted argument about the merits or otherwise of some new movie technique. For our young recruit, concentrating on a problem with a project, it proved too much of a distraction and, in measured tones, he remarked:

"It beats me how youse blokes can get so worked up about shadders on the wall!"

It served as a timely reminder that they, too, had a job to do. But the phrase also lodged firmly in the vocabulary of those of us who heard it.

'Shadders on the wall' — projected images, moving and still — antedated the writer by quite a few decades but they were foreign to me as a child, mainly because I spent my early years at Bargo on the NSW southern highlands. Too small a village to attract even an itinerant 'picture show man', it was also too far from a town to encourage sorties to the 'flicks' along the pot-holed blue-metal track that passed, in the early 1920s, for the main Sydney-Melbourne road.

Community hall

The first step towards a local picture show was taken about 1922, when my maternal grandfather, the late Alma Pyne



Alf Hicks, plumber, gasfitter, motor mechanic, electrician and picture show man. His wife Emily's main technical contribution was to put out crockery dishes and collect 'dill' (distilled water) for the battery bank when it rained.

('Alf') Hicks, decided that the small but growing community needed a motor garage and a general purpose assembly hall — equivalent to the time-worn 'Mechanics Institute' or 'School of Arts' that can still be found in some Australian country towns.

An unpretentious fibro and galvanised iron building, with a sturdy old Beale piano and a stack of 4-chair folding plywood seats, Hick's Hall (pronounced with or without the aspirants) soon became the automatic venue for church services, dances, lodge meetings, village concerts and even Saturday 'arvo roller skating.

Rather than rely on kerosene wick, or petrol pressure lamps for the complex, the innovative/hobbyist side of Alf Hicks' make-up opted for electric lighting — which had to be locally sourced because the nearest power mains were miles away.

As an interim measure, he installed a commercial 32V system, popular on rural properties, but he clearly had more ambitious ideas in mind — like a picture show.

So, down behind the hall he built a galvanised iron shed with a solid concrete floor and hardwood shelves sturdy enough to support an assortment of automotive accumulators, linked in series to produce an appropriately higher voltage. I gather that he was aiming at 110V, but finally settled for 80V as a more manageable figure, for which standard light globes were available.

To charge the battery bank he installed a horizontal single-cylinder petrol engine with twin flywheels, as commonly used on farms to pump water and/or drive a sawbench for cutting firewood.

A flat pulley and leather belt drove a chunky DC generator delivering 100 or so volts DC, sufficient to charge the battery bank.

On the wall, he mounted a stout bakelite panel carrying a couple of meters, knife switches and a fuse box,

the exact function of which I can now only guess at.

As a bonus, the system offered a way of charging 'wireless' A-batteries (4V or 6V lead-acid accumulators). This was a service that local wireless fans could scarcely have done without, when public broadcasting began in 1923/4.

Scarcely a day would pass without Alf Hicks spending an hour or more in the engine shed checking through the batteries with his faithful old hydrometer, to see whether they needed an extra boost from the generator.

The system expands

In due course, the DC supply was extended to other nearby shops and dwellings, the owners of which were only too happy to pay for the convenience of electric light. By present-day standards, the 80V globes were of modest wattage, but to people accustomed to the pale glow of candles and wick-type kerosene lamps, they were brilliant!

Expansion of the system carried with it a responsibility to the customers, leading to the installation of a second — and larger — generator and a much more powerful single-cylinder engine designed to start on petrol, warm up on kerosene and run on diesel fuel. Just

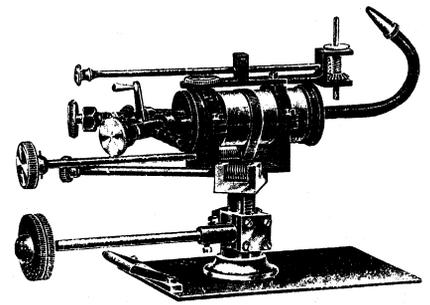
starting it, with a crank handle on the flywheel spindle was a job-and-a-half in itself.

His crowning achievement was the ultimate provision of night lighting for a nearby tennis club — I gather by running 110V lamps direct from the larger generator, independently of the battery bank. Installed on high poles around the court in large down-reflectors, they provided ample light for social tennis. With lighting representing the main load on the system, the battery bank could cope with daytime needs but, as darkness fell, someone always had to be on hand to start up one or other of the engines, depending on the anticipated load.

And, come hail, rain or crackling frost, someone had to wait up until everyone else had gone to bed before turning the engine off again!

To a mechanically minded grandson, this was fascinating stuff. And, for me, 'Pa' Hicks became a role model of a man who did things because he saw them as a challenge — with the happy knack of making them pay well enough to support his next venture, whatever it might be.

Only recently, long after his death, did I learn from my mother that, as a licensed plumber and gasfitter, her father Alf Hicks had been closely involved in



A limelight burner, as used in very early slide and movie projectors.

gas street lighting in what is now the city of Orange in the central west of NSW. This was around the turn of the century.

When the local council subsequently decided to update to electricity, Alf Hicks read up on the technology and got involved in this as well. As a much older man, his installation at Bargo was, in a sense, an exercise in turning back the clock. But I must get back to the original theme.

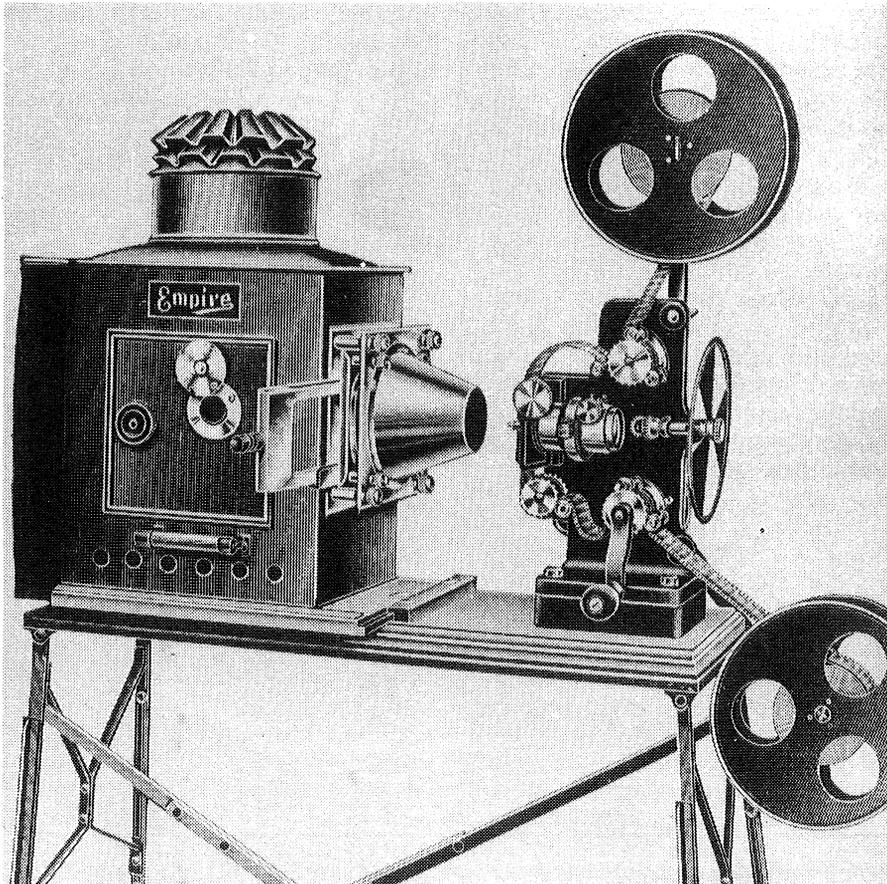
First 'shadders'

As far as I can recall, it was in Hicks' Hall that, as a lad, I saw my first-ever projected pictures — not of the moving kind, but as still pictures from hand-tinted glass slides and a still projector (a 'magic lantern') brought along by a visiting Christian missionary. Even now, still projectors offer a tempting subject in themselves, ranging from those distant days to the electronically automated Paximat that I currently own.

A British encyclopaedia, published around 1850 described a magic lantern as: *An optical instrument by means of which small figures painted with transparent varnish on slides of glass are represented on a wall or screen considerably magnified. It is generally used as a toy and affords amusement from the grotesque character of the figures.*

The dictionary went on to explain that the magic lantern had also found a serious application for educational purposes, as for illustrating astronomy lectures. Moreover, with improvements in the art of photography by Daguerre and Talbot, large-scale enlargement and presentation made possible by the magic lantern brought an awareness of form and beauty in items as small as a few grains of desert sand.

My recollections of this first encounter with a magic lantern are vague but I do remember a large lamphouse surmounted by a curved metal chimney, obviously intended to let heat out but keep stray light in. On the front was a brass



An 'Empire' silent projector of 1914, probably rather similar in construction to the machine that Alf Hicks used when he set up his first picture show in Bargo.

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rack to accommodate the slides, each about 90mm square, plus a lens in an adjustable sliding tube.

In the absence of normal mains power, I can only assume that the projector used limelight — explained in my century-old *Science for All* as a Bunsen-type burner from which the flame played on a piece of lime to produce a brilliant white light. The burner was fed from a mixture of oxygen and hydrogen (or coal gas, or acetylene), either from separate pressure cylinders or pressure bags shaped rather like old-fashioned bellows and loaded by weights to expel the gas under pressure.

Looking back, I can recall being vastly intrigued by the idea of projecting images on the wall, and even more so by the notion of moving pictures. Indeed some of my limited pocket money was diverted to the purchase of toy projectors of one kind and another — all of them a complete let-down.

I also became an exponent of the art of drawing stick figures on the edge of consecutive pages of exercise books. When flipped through, they would perform a variety of gymnastic tricks — a more graphic explanation of moving pictures to my schoolboy peers than any number of words.

Movies at last

Local interest in the lantern lecture, plus a couple of belated visits from an itinerant picture show man must have spurred on my grandfather, because it was about that time that he began seriously to explore the possibility of running his own picture show. This, of course, was well back in the silent era.

Initially, he could have got away with using the hall back-to-front, as was often done by itinerant picture show men. The seating would be set up with the audience facing a screen erected near the front entrance, with the projector shooting over their heads from the elevated stage.

Rather than do things by halves, Alf Hicks fitted out a projection room above the entrance, lined with fibro-asbestos and galvanised flat-iron as a precaution against any accident with the highly flammable nitrate film. It proved to be a timely provision, with fire safety regulations being progressively tightened over the years that followed. He also confirmed that a carbon arc system could be operated directly from his 80V DC supply, and determined specifications for the lenses necessary to project an adequate

image on to a permanent screen above the stage at the far end of the hall.

On the strength of this, he bought a second-hand Powers projector and lamphouse — a typical early model with an exposed (and noisy) gear train that posed an ever-present threat to straying fingers or loose clothing. It was duly set up to one side of the new projection room, leaving space for a second projector, if and when he could afford one.

Film distribution

To receive regular programs in those days, an obvious course for an isolated country exhibitor was to arrange with a major film library for inclusion in a distribution circuit. Despatched in cans in a stout steel box, a complete program (two full length features plus supporting shorts) would be sent by train to town A.

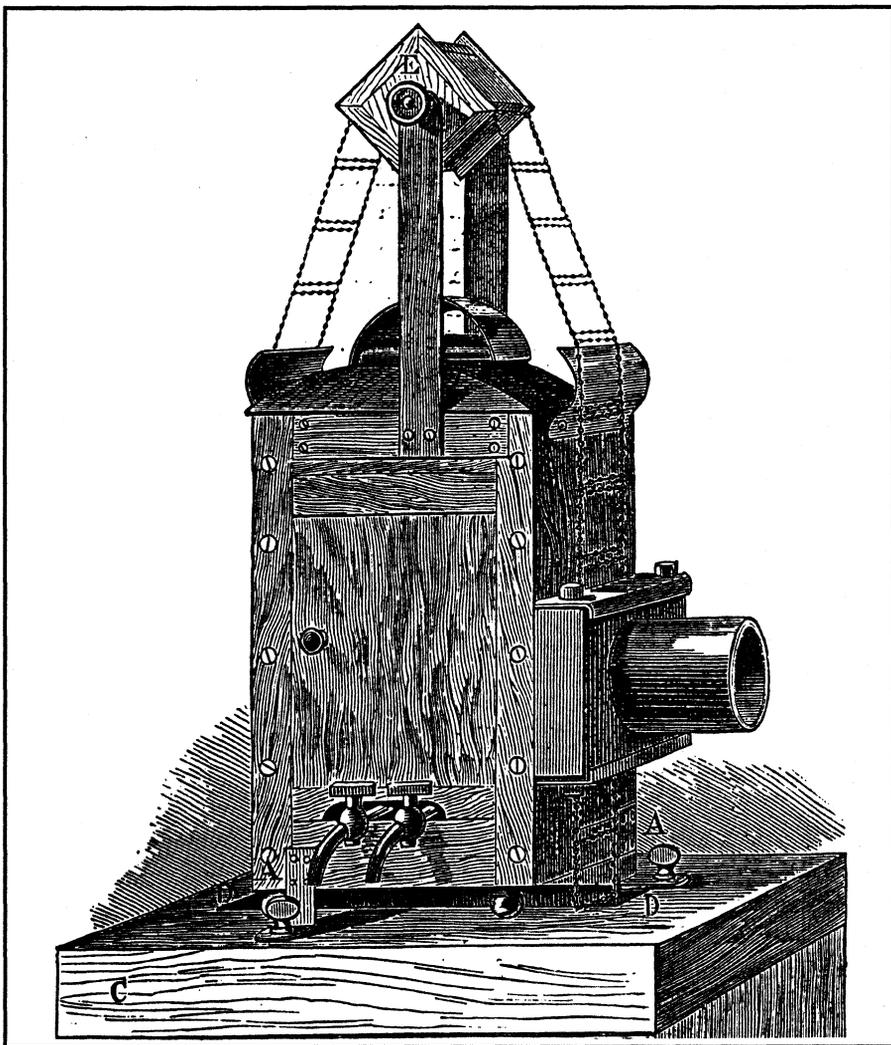
Having been shown on the appropriate night, the exhibitor would be required to repack and forward the films to town B

on a nominated passenger or goods train. The films would continue thus to towns C, D, and so on, until the last exhibitor on the list returned them to the distributor.

According to a friend who was himself involved with a country show in the early days, the circuit idea had been adapted from the USA and UK.

The classic example, he said, was in North America where the films in one circuit ultimately ended up in Alaska, by then so far away (and so worn?) that they were scarcely worth the cost of recovery. Accordingly, the distributor arranged for the programs to be written off and literally buried in Alaska — box, cans, spools, films and all.

According to a more recent report, someone had dug up some of the boxes, to find that the Alaskan permafrost had preserved the contents more effectively than if they had been returned and stored in the normal way. A virtual treasure



A high tech slide projector 100 years ago. Slides clipped into a chain leading out of — and back into — the storage box. The lid could be tilted to elevate the image. Note the gas tubes feeding the limelight burner.



Hicks' garage at Bargo, operated by Alf Hicks (pictured) and his son Reg, a formally trained fitter/machinist. It provided a ready technical back-up for the picture show and the associated electricity supply system.

trove of historic prints stood to be recovered.

There was no such romance about our local distribution circuits, which were viewed rather as a 'white knuckle' arrangement, with each and every show heavily dependent on the previous exhibitor and the ever-present vagaries of the transport system.

Film check

As a lad, I can recall being despatched to the station on my bike to check when a certain train was due and to inquire whether anyone could confirm that a box of film had indeed been loaded into the guards van. When the box did finally arrive, someone had to manhandle it on to a station porter's trolley and trundle it down the road to the community hall.

When he finally got his show under way, my grandfather soon discovered that getting hold of the films on time was only half the story — but more about that later.

As originally set up, the Bargo picture show was about as basic as it could be and thereby typical of many other village picture shows around the country.

From about 7.45pm onwards, the more conservative patrons would take their (plywood) seats in an orderly fashion. But the 'mob' would congregate outside, enjoying a mag and a fag before they went in. Just before 8.00, the operator would flick the outside lights on and off, as a sign that the show was about to start. The mob would then surge inside, to be

greeted by a local family musician, settling down for a long session at the piano.

One soon got to know the style and repertoire of individual players. One had contrived endless variations of 'Bye, Bye Blackbird': pensive, romantic, dramatic and so on. Another would trail off into near silence when he, along with the audience, became engrossed in the action on the screen.

On special nights, when the distributors came up with a big-name feature, the audience might be treated as well to a local violinist — likewise rewarded by a 'few bob' and the chance to see the film for 'nix'!

Would you believe that the writer even made his debut, in those days, as a picture show lolly boy with a box-tray slung from his shoulders and expectantly intoning: "Peanuts, lollies and chocolates!"

The technical side

Up in the operating booth, the sole silent projector was hand-cranked, requiring the operator and/or his assistant (official or otherwise) to turn the handle for the three-odd hours of each show. To be allowed to 'operate' the projector was a rare treat, but one from which the novelty soon evaporated as one alternated from right hand to left hand and then both hands together.

Silent films were meant to be projected at a rate of 16 frames per second, but the speed was not critical.

Operators tended to keep the speed down to the nominated figure if the program was short, but to speed things up a bit if they wanted to avoid too late a night.

Every 11 or maybe 22 minutes, the show would come to an abrupt stop while the operator loaded the next spool — a situation that was the signal for loud boo-ing and whistling from the kids occupying the 'sixpenny backless' wooden stools up front.

Years later, I attended a film show in a similar community hall on Norfolk Island. If it hadn't been for the difference in time and place, I could have sworn that the kids down the front were the same ones that used to patronise the show at Bargo!

As well as loading and cranking the projector, the operator had to keep an eye on the arc, visible through small ruby glass windows in each side of the lamphouse and controlled by knurled fibre knobs on shafts protruding from the rear. It was strictly a manually operated device, uncomplicated by any 'new-fangled' automatic feed.

To strike the arc, the carbons were touched together and then immediately separated until the arc looked about right. Evidence that it was so was a brilliant, steady pool of light neatly encompassing the film gate on the projector.

To keep it that way, the projectionist frequently had to nudge one or other of the controls to compensate for gradual erosion of the carbon rods. If, for any reason, he overlooked to do so, he would

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be jerked back to reality by wavering illumination of the screen or no picture at all!

Film problems

As mentioned earlier, picking up the films from the railway station was only half the story. Ideally, they would have arrived ready for screening; but as an interested kid, I can recall the long hours that projectionists of the day used to spend on Saturday afternoons checking out the films ready for the evening.

It certainly wasn't because they enjoyed work; rather, because they were anxious to avoid the embarrassment of things going wrong before an audience known to them personally.

Depending on the title and the supplier, films might arrive on nominally 1000ft (300m) spools, in cans about 25cm (10") in diameter.

They would often be labelled and/or carry a 'leader' and 'trailer' identifying the film's title and 'Part 1', 'Part 2' etc., and would run for around 10 minutes. Some films, alternatively, would arrive on larger spools carrying a nominal 2000ft and running for 20-odd minutes.

Operators in country circuits soon learned, however, not to take the films for granted.

Films from the last showing could even be taken straight off the projector and despatched 'end out' — in the wrong can.

Even if rewind — presumably by a junior — they might arrive 'start out' but with the emulsion on the wrong side. In

that event, the operator would either have to double rewind or remember to load them on to the projector supply sprocket back-to-front, in the hope that they would feed correctly.

To minimise the number of change-overs in a show, particularly with only one projector, the projectionist had the option of splicing together 1000ft reels and winding them on to larger spools. In so doing, they could either leave the intervening leaders and trailers in situ or temporarily remove them — with the risk of re-attaching them later to the wrong reels!

There were stories of films being dumped off split reels straight back into the can, with no spool; of metre-lengths of film being snipped out, to disguise the fact that someone had damaged them by mis-loading; and so on.

Working ahead

In the course of rewinding, and time permitting, a fussy operator might well run an entire suspect film through his fingers, sensitive to anything that could suggest a faulty splice or a torn sprocket hole. Better to re-splice then, or snip around the torn hole than risk a break in mid-show.

From conversations overheard at the time, the condition of films doing the rounds of country shows in the early '20s was the subject of on-going complaint. The distributors blamed exhibitors for mistreating them, and inspectors did the rounds looking for handling abuse or projectors with worn sprockets, jammed guide rollers or fouled gates.

Exhibitors, on the other hand, would complain that the prints were already

patched and scratched after long seasons in the city and suburbs.

Film traumas were always somebody else's fault. They were either 'like that when we got them' or 'okay when they left here'!

What was not hearsay is the fact that, in the operating booth at Bargo, as in other country picture halls, there were always enough scraps of nitrate film lying around to make 'stink bombs'. Rolled tightly with a strip of paper and lit, the film would smoulder rather than burn and emit the most pungent odour imaginable. Set off in the leading carriage of a country train, it could penetrate a whole string of corridor cars. But I digress...

When a break did occur during actual projection, skilled operators were amazingly adept at minimising the interruption, particularly in the early days before feed and take-up magazines on projectors became mandatory.

In less time than it takes to tell, the operator would snap shut the light shutter between the lamphouse and gate, flip open the guide rollers and sprockets and yank a couple of metres of film from the top spool down the side of the projector. This would then be slipped back into guides and sprockets so that the projector could be re-started.

The operator (or his assistant) would meanwhile pick up the end feeding on to the floor and tuck it under the loose end on the take-up spool. It would be held in place for a couple of turns until it grabbed and the show would proceed, leaving the break to be spliced later.

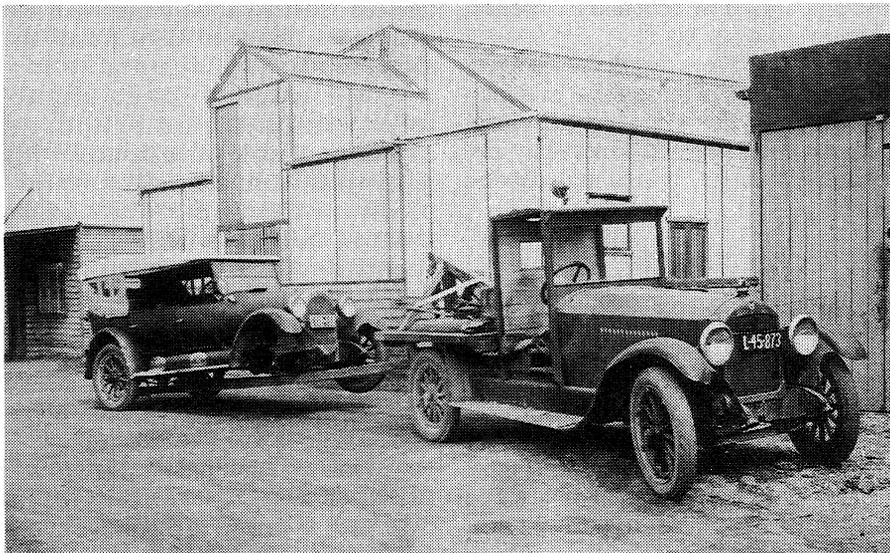
Electric drive

To a practical man like Alf Hicks, the need to hand crank the projector posed an obvious challenge. It wasn't long before he dug up an 80V DC motor from somewhere and worked out a way to drive the projector with a V-belt and a couple of pulleys.

The drive motor and an extension shaft were mounted on a board, supported at each end by angle brackets anchored to the front wall of the projection booth. The board was held by a bolt at one end and a bolt and wing-nut at the other.

The operator soon realised that by good luck or good management the tension on the belt could be varied enough by simply nudging the board to serve as a speed control — by belt slip — or as a clutch, if he pushed/pulled hard enough.

With the original projector motor driven, the obvious next challenge was to instal a second projector, hopefully without costing the proverbial arm and a leg. From somewhere (presumably



This picture is the only one available of Hicks' hall in the days when it doubled as a cinema. Note the projection room over the front entrance, the unforeseen rendez-vous for a million airborne insects on hot summer evenings!

You've gotta' laugh — or maybe cry!

During the preparation of this article, a friend volunteered the following sorry tale of what befell his father, as operator of a picture show in a small town in the NSW west.

It happened, he said, in the early silent days, before film magazines became mandatory. Operators with only a single projector available would often splice three 1000ft reels on to 2000ft spools to minimise the number of breaks — a 'dicey' procedure which was frowned on by the film companies.

On this particular day, some of the films, on arrival, seemed to be in the wrong cans. But after carefully sorting through them, only two reels remained in doubt, one of which had to be 'THE END' of the first feature.

The preceding reel ended in a snow scene and since one of the two doubtful reels started with a similar snow scene, they reckoned that it was a fairly safe bet to splice them together.

The remaining reel was accordingly spliced between the opening reel of the short feature destined to follow interval and the start of the main feature — all three being wound on to a single spool.

The support feature turned out to be a real 'tear jerker', and handkerchiefs were out all over the hall as the stern father prepared (literally) to fling his fallen daughter out into the cold, cold snow.

At that point, the final reel came up. But instead of the forlorn figure, bespectacled comedian Harold Lloyd suddenly appeared doing his own ludicrous thing — in the snow!

The operators had no choice but to let the film run, in the full knowledge that Pansy's fate was firmly spliced half-way through the next overfull reel — between the first half of a Harold Lloyd comedy and the start of the main feature.

through the exhibitors' 'grapevine') he located a second Powers, similar to the one already installed. It had no lamphouse but it was a start.

It was duly set up in the projection booth, complete and working except for a light source. The answer to that small problem, dreamed up by my grandfather and a fitter/machinist uncle — Reg Hicks — was both novel and successful.

A suitable platform was contrived for the non-existent lamphouse, and two boards bolted in place to form a bridge between it and the original lamphouse stand. A half-inch (13mm) diameter steel rod was then pinned to each board, to form two slightly curved parallel steel tracks. Saddles were then added to the underside of the lamphouse, loose enough and with a smear of grease, to ensure a smooth ride from one projector to the other. The rest was easy:

The operator would start up on projector 1, then duck around under the 'bridge' and load up projector 2. As the reel film came to its end, he would start up projector 2; his assistant would then close the shutter on projector 1 and give the lamphouse a quick shove along the tracks. Next moment, the new image would be in place. If he forgot to close the shutter, ghostly patterns would traverse the hall as light spilling from the lamphouse shone through the various ports.

Fortunately, the lamphouse didn't seem to mind the treatment and the routine was vastly preferable to the earlier pandemonium between reels, par-

ticularly when the changeover coincided with a tense moment in the action.

Actors, good & 'bad'

Speaking of on-screen action, having a picture show in the family rapidly transformed my complete ignorance of the 'flicks' to a relatively high degree of familiarity. Along with other kids in the district, I soon developed strong likes and dislikes for particular actors.

Tom Mix was a rare treat and Richard Dix could usually be relied on for a bit of action. Charlie Chaplin, Harry Langdon and other comedians were measured, not by their artistry but by how much they made us laugh. At the very bottom of the list was Adolph Menjou, a ladies' man who, we all agreed, 'wouldn't have been able to fight his way out of a paper bag!' As for the 'sorts', in my book Bebe Daniels left the rest for dead.

(I still remember my dismay when, reviewing a 'memories' record album, decades later, I came across a song by my one-time idol. Let's just say she would never have been a candidate for *The Sound of Music*.)

As an exhibitor, my grandfather was on the mailing list for lavish film catalogs produced by the various film companies. I liked to browse through them, proud of the number of films I had seen. These days, those same catalogs would be treasured by historically minded film buffs but I guess that, like so many other publications, they were simply 'shot out' when they appeared to have served their immediate purpose.

Back in the projection booth, the two Powers machines did a good job for quite a while, thanks to mandatory maintenance and up-dating — such as, for example, the addition of fireproof magazines for the feed and take-up spools. Itinerant inspectors were not exactly the most welcome people around the film circuit.

As it happens, however, Alf Hicks was offered a Kalee projector, of much more modern design than the other projectors, with an enclosed drive train and much quieter in operation. It was duly given pride of place in the booth, and the Powers it replaced put to one side as a possible source of spare parts.

There was just one problem, in that the lamphouse had to be re-positioned. So instead of the rails being curved in a simple arc, they had to be kinked. The system still worked, but the erratic movement of the lamphouse from one projector to the other became little short of spectacular!

Down in the audience, one didn't need to be told which projector was in use. The projection booth may have been reasonably fireproof, but it certainly wasn't soundproof.

Nor was it insect proof. With no street lights, the one outdoor bulb high up on the front of the building attracted insects from miles around. When they arrived, they would discover an even brighter light just inside the door: a carbon arc. On warm summer evenings, occupants of the projection booth had two choices: close the outside door and suffocate, or open it and be targeted by a host of airborne creepy-crawlies!

But the days of the show in this form proved to be strictly numbered, due largely to the emergence of the 'talkies' around 1930.

With the supply and the appeal of silent films drying up, village picture shows faced a crisis. If they were to continue in operation, they would have to be re-equipped for sound, requiring new film gates and lenses, sound heads and an amplifier system, and projector drive systems that would be both accurate and wow-free. There was much talk also about more stringent maintenance procedures and increased film hiring charges.

What with that and an availability problem with operators, Alf Hicks decided to give the game away — for the time being, at least. The projection booth was locked and the projectors were left to languish under oilstained dust covers, awaiting a new burst of enthusiasm. But that is another story.

(To be continued)