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## CHAPTER 3

THE SUBJECT AREA -  
TWENTY-FOUR MILES AROUND NELUNGALOO

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Nelungaloo is a small siding on the railway between Parkes and Condobolin in central-west New South Wales. Besides a couple of houses and a silo, there is only the galvanised-iron hall to act as a witness that a settlement exists. To the best of everyone's memories, pictures were never screened at Nelungaloo. However, the settlement provides the centrepiece of a circle that can be drawn around part of the state that had a strong and varied tradition of picture exhibition.

Australian cinema exhibition was originally in the hands of independent operators. It was not long into this century before the economic benefits were seen in relation to mergers from which a number of chains developed. Some were large (eg Union Theatres and Hoyts), some were medium (eg Western Suburbs Cinemas Ltd, Snider and Dean Pty Ltd), some were small (eg Tom's Amusu Touring Talkies<sup>1</sup>). Many exhibitors maintained their independence but, occasionally, banded together to form film buying groups (eg Annandale/Leichhardt/Fivedock/Haberfield<sup>2</sup>). In the suburbs and the country towns, right across the nation, one could find a variety of theatre building types either controlled by a chain or an independent operator. Competition was seen as good for the industry, although it was heavily biased towards the overseas' film companies that controlled

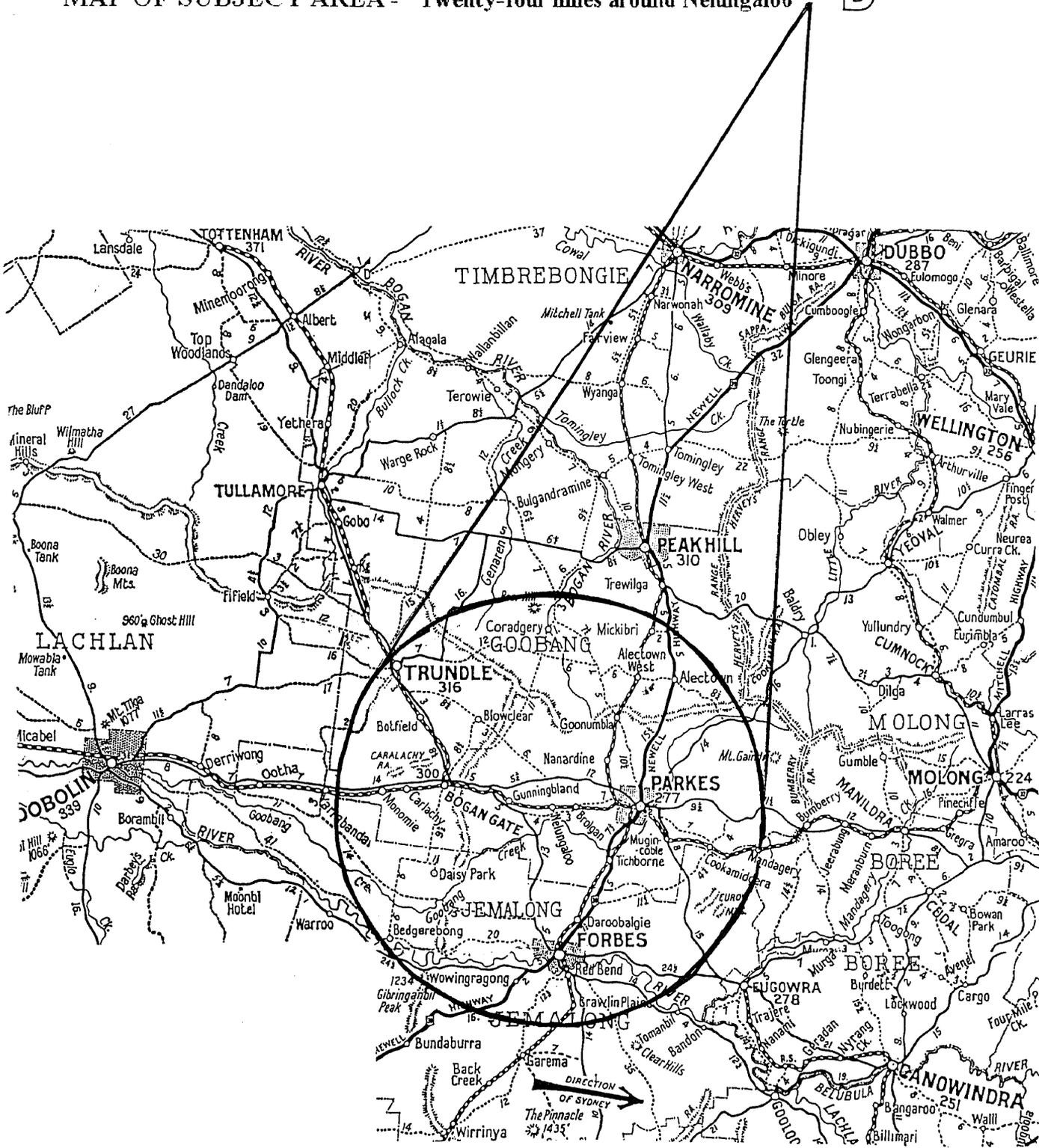
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<sup>1</sup> Personal correspondence with Alan Tom 1994, and KINO, Dec 1992, No. 42, Australian Theatre Historical Society Inc. Sydney, pp.4-7.

<sup>2</sup> Australasian Exhibitor, Sydney, 31.3.1955, p.1. This film buying pool had existed for many years prior to this reference that refers to the signing of one film contract. Cross shareholding arrangements in the Haberfield Theatre between the owners of the other theatres had been in existence for many years and the film-buying pool was mentioned to the writer by others who were involved with the Haberfield Theatre when this theatre was being researched in 1985/86.

# MAP OF SUBJECT AREA - "Twenty-four miles around Nelungaloo"

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Map Source: Gregory's Guide to NSW 21st Edition.

most of the product. For some, competition brought expensive lessons when both talking pictures and the Great Depression arrived almost simultaneously. This part of Australian cinema history is relatively well-documented in a variety of sources<sup>3</sup>.

A much larger research project could be undertaken to investigate the picture-going habits of Australians throughout the years, one that would include a variety of ethnic groups and indigenous people. It could seek to ascertain differences or similarities between Sydney and Perth, Broome and Rockhampton, Fitzroy and Ryde, etc.<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, one area in New South Wales was selected, within which was once a wide representation of various types of picture theatres. The area selected is a 'V' shape, the bottom point of the 'V' being Forbes, the right hand line connecting with Parkes and Alectown, the left hand line connecting with Bogan Gate and Trundle. Between, there are a number of small settlements. The area contained picture theatres operated by a large chain, a small chain, independent operators, travelling picture shows and, lately, a new satellite cinema (part of a new idea in cinema development). Within the area was (and still is) a wide cross-section of population typical of much of New South Wales - business people, professionals, tradespeople, townfolk, wealthy pastoralists, rural workers, the elderly and children.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example:

R. Thorne, Picture Palace Architecture. Sydney: Sun Books Pty. Ltd., 1976;

S. Brand, Picture Palaces and Flea Pits. Sydney: Dreamweaver Books, 1983;

T. O'Brien, The Greater Union Story. Sydney: Greater Union Organisation Pty. Ltd., 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Film distributors and cinema companies have only ever done this type of thing in a piecemeal fashion. Theatre managers observations and film distribution statisticians using box office receipts to ascertain if a film is doing well at a particular location were and are about the limits of the investigation. Old-time theatre managers of particular circuits, in discussion with the writer, have stated that they met once a week with film bookers and discussed promotional activities and how particular films went. A telephone discussion in May 1994 with a Sydney-based film distributor's statistician (Mr R Threlfall) revealed that the box office receipts were considered to be the best guide to a film's success in a particular area. Films are offered to particular areas after an appraisal has been made as to the suitability of the films in relation to what is known or perceived about particular areas. The statistician said that nothing was written down.

The subject area falls into two local government areas: to the north, the Shire of Parkes, (formed from the Municipality of Parkes and the Shire of Goobang in 1980<sup>5</sup>); to the south, the Shire of Forbes (formed from Municipality of Forbes and the Shire of Jemalong in 1981<sup>6</sup>). With regards to cinema exhibition in Australia, the area is an excellent microcosm. Insofar as the lack of preservation of the history of their picture theatres is concerned, the area is typical of the nation.

The subject area is approximately 250 miles west of Sydney, about a five hour drive on today's roads, although a full day by train in years gone by. The undulating Western Slopes stretch from the Victorian border to the Queensland border. Its history is as old as the rest of Australia, and European settlement came almost as soon as Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth crossed the Blue Mountains in 1813. It is predominantly a sheep and wheat growing area and has been since last century. There have been mining booms in parts of it, and other land uses tried. It has suffered from droughts, fires and floods, as have many parts of the state. While some settlements sprang up as a result of gold discoveries, others emerged slowly from a need to service the rural families once the enormous pastoral runs of the squatting days were divided for closer settlement in the latter part of the last century and the early years of this. Whatever their reason for forming, the settlements' continued growth and development were nourished by serving the needs of the farming communities that surrounded them. The development of the railways saw the area criss-crossed with steel rails that helped to bring the farmers' produce to market as well as to strengthen the settlements through which they passed. These towns and villages, no less than their city and suburban counterparts, were in need of entertainment venues and the picture theatres played a very important part in the social life of those places.

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<sup>5</sup> Year supplied by officer of Parkes Shire Council, 13.12.1994.

<sup>6</sup> Year supplied by officer of Forbes Shire Council, 13.12.1994.

The settlements included in the subject area range from very small villages to large country towns and their associated cinema histories run the full range from chains to independents. Some places had nightly screenings, while others had screenings a few times each month. They range through halls, purpose-built theatres, travelling tent shows and open air venues. While Parkes and Forbes once were able to boast chain cinemas on a par with quality Sydney suburban shows, Bogan Gate can proudly declare in 1994 that it has a genuine silent movie theatre that operated from 1926 to c1929 and is almost unaltered. The records of these places have, for the most, disappeared and the communities in which they once operated have retained very little material.

Researching the past requires finding suitable sources. An old African proverb states, "*When an old person dies, a library burns to the ground.*"<sup>107</sup> The 'conflagration' continues day by day. Not only are people's memories extinguished, so too are company and personal records once they are believed to be of no further use. Diane Collins, twenty years ago, noted that archives of film distributors and exhibitors are "*either unavailable or destroyed*".<sup>108</sup> The writer of this thesis has found that "*destroyed*" is more often the case. The research undertaken for this thesis has taken the writer into a number of public libraries and archives, personal records and the memories of those who worked in or attended the pictures. Within the subject area the local historical societies and libraries are almost devoid of any information about the picture theatre venues in their areas including personal histories. For the subject area, it is the first time that anyone has researched extensively about its picture venues and their relevance. Parkes' venues were mentioned in a brief

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<sup>107</sup> B. Allen and W.L. Montell, From Memory to History. Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research. Nashville, Tennessee: The American Association for State and Local History, 1981, p. xii.

<sup>108</sup> D. Collins, Cinema and Society in Australia 1920-39. Ph.D. Thesis (unpublished), University of Sydney, 1975, p. v.

manner in a 1933 short history of the town<sup>109</sup>, and in a 1983 book<sup>110</sup> that repeated the 1933 material but with the addition of incorrect material. A 1987 history of Trundle<sup>111</sup> contained brief information about the town's picture history. Nothing has been written about the picture venues of Forbes or the other villages in the area.

Because of this lack of an historical record, it was considered appropriate to undertake a systematic historical analysis of the venues used for showing pictures prior to gathering qualitative data. By adopting this approach, the historical overview could be used as a check against people's memories. Similarly, the oral histories and correspondence (the qualitative material) would add an extra dimension to the record once created. This, in itself, was not a new idea. Allen and Montell in 1981 suggested this: *"Information gained in this manner will serve to direct attention to topics of potential interest, as well as to provide valuable background information."*<sup>112</sup> Because very little work had been done on the topic within the subject area, the creation of Chapter 4 (The History) brought together for the first time a number of primary sources and a few secondary sources.

Having determined the subject area, a detailed map was studied and towns and villages were noted. From research into the history of picture theatres in other parts of New South Wales already

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<sup>109</sup> Parkes Jubilee Souvenir., Parkes: Parkes Municipal Council, 1933.

<sup>110</sup> R.T. Tindall, Parkes - One Hundred Years of Local Government. Parkes: Parkes Municipal Council, 1983.

<sup>111</sup> J.P. Watts and C.F. Wright, The Story of Trundle. A Town and Its People. Trundle: I. Berry and J. Curr, 1987.

<sup>112</sup> B. Allen and W.L. Montell, op. cit., p. 102.

undertaken by the writer, it was possible to create a list of picture venues within the area.<sup>113</sup> However, this was not a complete list as primary source material discovered afterwards (including newspapers and files at the New South Wales State Archives) contained other venues. Histories of each venue were compiled using a variety of primary sources. If a secondary source was available, it was used but was checked against existing primary sources. On occasions (for example, Trundle's early picture days) primary sources were unprocurable. For the most, however, secondary sources do not exist.

The historical record (Chapter 4) of picture venues thus created covers the New South Wales' settlements of Alectown, Bedgerebong, Bogan Gate, Cookamidgera, Forbes, Gunningbland, Parkes, Tichborne and Trundle. In order to assist with the creation of The History, holdings from a number of public institutions were utilised. These included the New South Wales State Archives, the New South Wales State Library (General Reference Library and Mitchell Library), the Fisher Library (University of Sydney) and the Australian Securities Commission. Many of the theatres and public halls within the study area had their own Chief Secretary's Department files. From 1909 it was law that any public theatre or public hall had to be licensed by the Chief Secretary's Department. This ensured a certain amount of safety for the public and allowed the government to know what was going on in those venues. Unfortunately, the extant files commence in the middle 1920s and it is not known what has happened to earlier documents (although there were occasional discoveries of pre-1920s items). At times, there are gaps in the files when certain years are missing. Local newspapers (where available) provided some information for the pre-1920s and the missing years. Contained within the Chief Secretary's files were annual inspection reports that

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<sup>113</sup> Sources used for this first step included Film Weekly Motion Picture Directory (1937 - 1971), the Chief Secretary's Department Theatres and Public Halls Lists 1959 and 1964, and R.T. Tindall, op. cit.

gave building dimensions and construction materials, seating capacities, position of operating box, details of type of screen in use, occasional sanitation reports and notes on safety equipment. Government Gazettes relating to licensing of the venues, licensing and de-licensing dates, letters to and from the Chief Secretary's Department, letters from exhibitors, complaints by others against exhibitors, letters to and from the Board of Fire Commissioners, Police Reports and certifications of fire proofing of curtains, stage drapes and screens were among the items in the files. In one file, details of ticket sales for a particular year were given.<sup>114</sup> This was a most unexpected find as it was not been found anywhere else. The particular operating company's files were long ago discarded.<sup>115</sup>

Also discovered in the New South Wales State Archives were the Board of Fire Commissioners' Theatres and Public Halls files. These provided similar information to those of the Chief Secretary's Department but did not include as diverse a range of material. As the Board was more concerned with safety in relation to fire, the information contained in these files often pertained to fire retardant measures undertaken by exhibitors and subsequent reports. Where a fire had taken place (for example a film fire in a projector), reports were completed and filed, and a copy sent to the Chief Secretary's Department.

Extensive newspaper holdings are contained in The State Library of New South Wales and, among these are a number of newspapers that provided excellent primary source material for the area

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<sup>114</sup> It was not usual for this information to be on file with the Chief Secretary and occurred only because it was part of a Statutory Declaration regarding an appeal against the issuing of a licence for a new picture theatre.

<sup>115</sup> The sales were for the Broadway Theatre, Parkes for 1938. This allowed an analysis of attendance in relation to population for that year. If one were to assume that the figures were accurate, then they give more detail than those in The Official Year Book of New South Wales because those figures included only taxable admissions and would not have included, for example, children's matinee tickets as they were under the taxable starting-point.

being studied. Newspapers used were: Peak Hill Express (incomplete set); Western Champion, Parkes; Forbes Advocate; Forbes Gazette; Parkes Champion Post; Champion Post, Parkes; Parkes Examiner; Forbes Times; Trundle Star (incomplete); Trundle and Tullamore Star; Sun-Herald, Sydney; Land (Sydney); Daily Mirror, Sydney; Australian Financial Review (Sydney). Contained in these newspapers is information about openings, closings, occasional disasters<sup>116</sup>, performances, coming attractions. At times, owing to a lack of other source material, the newspapers provided the only information about the picture venues. On rare occasions, a photograph was found in a newspaper that related to a venue.

The Australian Securities Commission provided some records for three companies that were associated with picture theatres in the subject area. Unfortunately, a lot of the older material was not available, presumably having been discarded or not considered necessary to have been placed onto microfilm. Individual exhibitors have either passed away or have failed, in general terms, to have kept anything.<sup>117</sup> Larger companies suffer from a similar malady. Western Cinemas Pty Ltd (controlling theatres in Parkes and Forbes) indicated that no records exist at the office. Another business source, the Register of Firms (held by the New South Wales State Archives), although perused, yielded nothing in relation to the subject area.<sup>118</sup>

Australian film exhibition trade journals ceased to be produced in the 1980s. They were in

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<sup>116</sup> For example, the explosion at the Royal Hall, Parkes in 1906 and the wall collapsing at the Broadway Theatre, Parkes in 1949.

<sup>117</sup> One example is a past exhibitor at Trundle who wrote that he had disposed of documents after the seven year mandatory period. This was mainly owing to lack of space.

<sup>118</sup> This source was checked in the hope of finding details about registered partnerships that operated picture theatres within the subject area. None were found.

existence from the early years of this century and provided material in relation to films available and, to a lesser extent, information about exhibitors and picture venues. The journals that were useful included Film Weekly (incomplete set); Film Weekly Motion Picture Directory (annual publication 1936 - 1971); Australasian Cinema; Australasian Exhibitor; Everyones (ceased in 1937).

The only Australian architectural journal that contained information about the subject area was Building and it provided one architectural drawing.<sup>119</sup>

Opening night programmes should provide a primary source for opening dates, contractors, opening films and other pertinent information<sup>120</sup>. Despite inquiries to local historical societies, searching libraries, letters to newspapers and speaking with a number of past exhibitors and patrons, only one opening night programme from within the subject area was found, it being in the hands of a local history group in Forbes.

The Official Year Book of New South Wales provided general data about population and taxable admissions to entertainment venues (when the tax was in existence). The information was useful only to a limited degree and has been quoted mainly in the Appendices.

While photographs provided an excellent primary source, in some cases, no photographs exist even though buildings stood in a community for many years. The writer took photographs of all the

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<sup>119</sup> Building, 11.8.1923, Sydney: Building Publishing Co., p. 61. A drawing of the Parkes' Broadway Theatre.

<sup>120</sup> Extracts from a number of programmes are cited in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

extant picture venues so that they might be recorded for posterity. Where useful, aspects of the photographs have been included in Chapter 4 (The History). In some cases, they provide the only information available. A selection of photographs has been included in the thesis as it is felt that they provide an extra dimension to the written text.

When written and photographic sources cease to exist or have been depleted, it is then that the researcher turns to the people. *"When newspaper files, court records, and other written resources normally utilized by historians have been destroyed by fire...and simple neglect, the only remaining source materials may be the oral recollections and personal reminiscences of local people."*<sup>121</sup> On a few occasions in Chapter 4, it was necessary to utilise some material from interviews and correspondence with current or former residents of the subject area in order to complete the picture. When used, this source was useful and provided enrichment as well as supplementing other sources. In some instances people's memories were incorrect and information that had been gained from other material was able to establish this.

*"The significance of our surroundings, geographical or architectural, is crucial to our sane survival, but it cannot be determined by polemic and opinion, no matter how imaginatively expressed or tenaciously held. Evidence is needed together with the development of a scientific analysis which will enable us to make sense of that evidence."*<sup>122</sup>

Places, whatever they are, *"have an impact"*, according to David Canter, English environmental

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<sup>121</sup> B. Allen and W.L. Montell, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>122</sup> D. Canter, *The Psychology of Place*. London: The Architectural Press Ltd., 1977, p.6.

psychologist, and "*...our understanding of them influences our actions...*"<sup>123</sup> Having completed *The History*, the next step was the human side of the research. Once an understanding of the picture buildings themselves had been established through the creation of Chapter 4, it was necessary to discover the relevance and importance that those buildings had for the people of their respective areas.

In order to add a 'human' element to the story, oral histories (group and single interviews) and correspondence were gathered. Prior to this, no known attempt has been made to interview the people of the subject area with regards to picture-going in pre-television times. As such, there were neither primary nor secondary sources available. Because this part of the research was to explore an aspect of human social interaction, it needed to draw heavily on people's memories. The participants in the oral history groups were senior citizens from Parkes and Forbes. Fortunately, the variety of people in the groups was such that good population cross-sections of both towns were achieved. Single interviews took place with former exhibitors, former theatre staff and the wives of former theatre managers. Correspondence from people who either live or have lived in the area under study was randomly acquired, mainly as responses to letters in two newspapers. They comprised townsfolk and farmfolk, and elderly to middle-age groups. As a result of the research, it can be stated that the people who lived in the area went to the pictures regardless of the films' titles because the picture theatre was their meeting place, their social gathering place that was not usurped until the early 1960s when television reached rural New South Wales.<sup>124</sup> In the preceding years, cinema exhibitors had spent money on their theatres and equipment in order to

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<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>124</sup> By the early 1960s, licensed clubs had started to become the social meeting places for mixed groups. Even children could go into the dining rooms.

attract patrons and to give them appropriate surroundings in which to enjoy their time away from the humdrum of daily life. The following quotation, from an American writer, may aptly apply to Australia. "...the picture on the screen at the Xanadu was secondary to the total adventure."<sup>125</sup>

Consequently, qualitative research was made use of in order to construct the 'human' side of the picture and the results of this are recorded in Chapter 5 (Personalising The Picture!). Group interviews ensured that a large amount of information was gathered quickly. Single interviews offered the opportunity to select specific people to fill-in gaps and offer information from a particular vantage point (for example, theatre managers). Both of these collection techniques have been described as "*purposeful conversations*"<sup>126</sup> and are not like formal, structured interviews. As Marchall and Rossman point out, they allow "...the participant's perspective on the social phenomenon of interest... [to]...unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it."<sup>127</sup> The third primary information collection technique was correspondence that was solicited through newspapers by a general letter from the writer. This afforded the opportunity for unbiased information as the respondents were unknown to the writer and the original letter used general terms. It was also possible to use the correspondence as a check against distortion, a thought that was mentioned by Marshall and Rossman when they wrote, "*When interviews are used alone, distortions are more likely, as interviewers may interject personal biases.*"<sup>128</sup> From the qualitative research (the oral history and correspondence), a series of categories emerged that may

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<sup>125</sup> B. M. Hall, The Best Remaining Seats. New York, U.S.A.: Da Capo Press, 1987, p. 24.

<sup>126</sup> C. Marshall and G.B. Rossman, Designing Qualitative Research. Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1989, p. 82.

<sup>127</sup> ibid., p. 82.

<sup>128</sup> ibid., p. 83. (Having two of the four focus groups conducted by the writer's wife, who is dispassionate about the whole topic, also helped to ensure lack of bias.)

be of use to future researchers who might undertake similar, or a more sociologically-based, piece of research. (These are recorded in Chapter 5.)

For the most, the picture buildings themselves have disappeared as has the technology that operated them. The staff that comprised an essential part of the operation have gone, either to senior citizenry or to their graves. The use of qualitative research with people who lived a substantial part of their lives before the introduction of television to the subject area was the only way of discovering the relevance and importance that the picture venues had for them in their daily lives. Having sought earlier works in Australia of a similar nature to this thesis, and having been unsuccessful, the writer was left with the challenge to gather his own information. Since no prior study of this nature and, in particular, for the subject area has been found, this makes the assembling of the material unique.

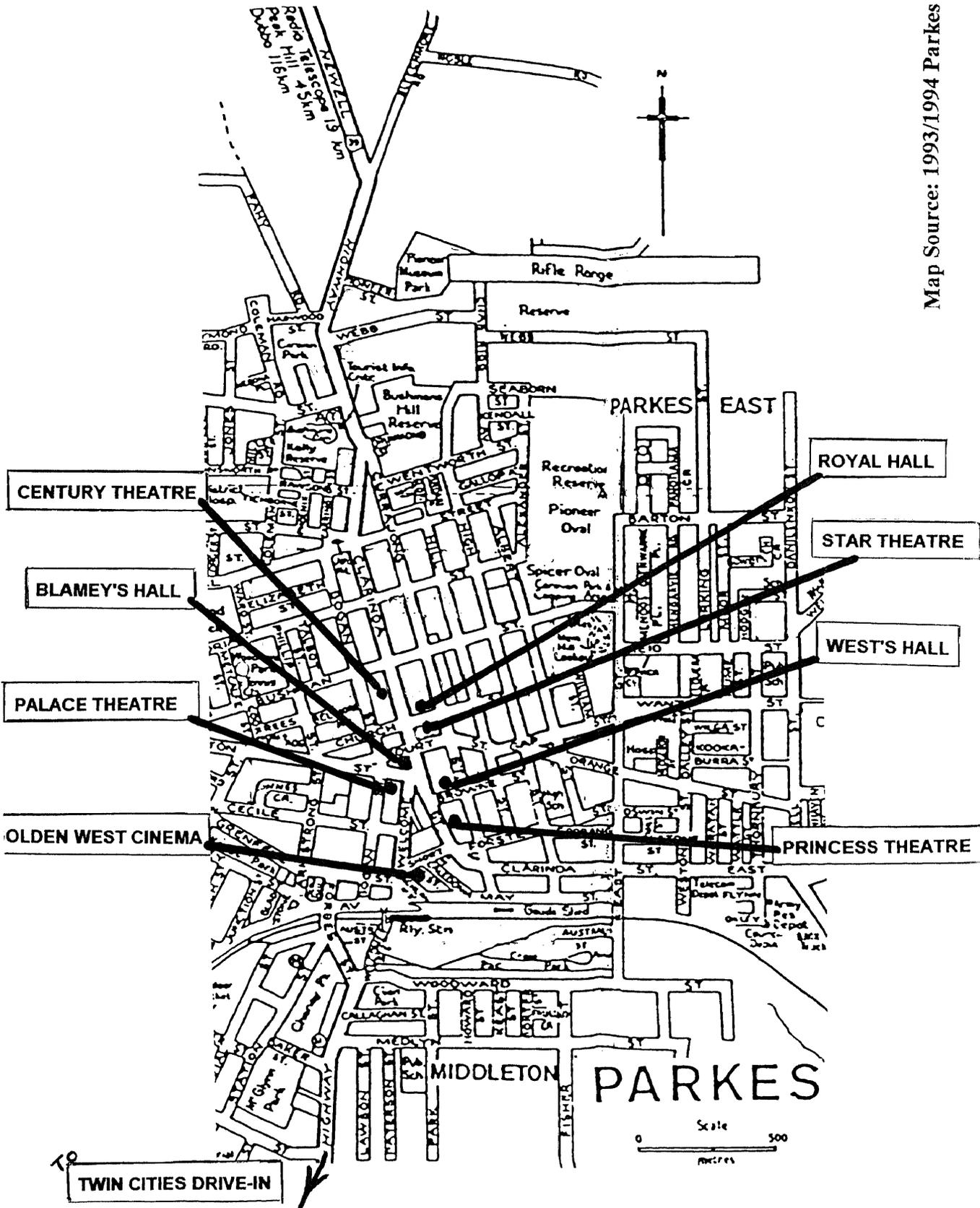
As a consequence of this thesis, it may be that a greater awareness will be raised with regards to the history of the New South Wales country picture theatre and its relevance to people in pre-television times. If it encourages others to commence recording this aspect of the past, then a little less of our heritage may, in future, be ignored or so carelessly discarded.

[There are some villages in the subject area whose halls were not known to have been used as picture venues. Since each hall was a social centre for its village and surrounding community, their histories are in Appendix G. Like the majority of their picture counterparts, the halls have not been documented by local people. The writer felt that they should be recorded for the sake of posterity.]

MAP OF PARKES, NSW showing sites of picture venues.



Map Source: 1993/1994 Parkes Community Guide.



MAP OF BOGAN GATE, NSW showing sites of picture venues.

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