
CHAPTER 5

PERSONALISING THE PICTURE

Twenty-four Miles Around Nelungaloo.

Using the oral histories and the correspondence.

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Using the oral histories and the correspondence.

While the gathering together of the history of the picture venues was challenging, acquiring knowledge from the human beings who had attended or who had worked in them was just as difficult. It is a little over thirty years since television came to the subject area. Many of those who were once regular attendees at the pictures in the 1910s - 40s period have passed away. Those who worked in the picture shows have fared the same. The history of the buildings is, in its own way, an important record. To add the 'human side' to a history gives life to what might otherwise be purely 'clinical'. So, it was decided to undertake a certain amount of qualitative research. First of all it was essential to find people who would be prepared to discuss their experiences of going to the pictures in pre-television days. Secondly, the reminiscences of former theatre employees would present the other side of the occasion. Since the writer believed that going to the pictures was a social outing, it was considered better to interview former patrons in group situations so that the interaction within the group might stimulate their memories. With the theatre employees, it was decided to undertake 'elite' interviews with those who could be found so that lines of inquiry could be explored if and where necessary.

Having decided to use group interviews as part of the qualitative research, a number of texts were consulted¹ for ideas. An interview guide of seven broad questions was devised for the (focus)

¹ For example:

- a. A. Strauss and J. Corbin. 1990. Basics of Qualitative Research. Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques. Newbury Park, U.S.A.: Sage Publications.
- b. C. Marshall and G.B. Rossman. 1989. Designing Qualitative Research. Newbury Park, U.S.A.: Sage Publications.

groups. (See Appendix H.) Because such a guide was not meant to be "a verbal version of a survey questionnaire"², it had to be constructed in such a way as to take the participants from more general questions to more specific questions. It also had to be open enough to allow the interviewer to probe responses and introduce new questions as the groups progressed. The general nature of the questions was meant to encourage all members of the groups to respond without being asked immediately for specific details that related to past events. A supplementary list of questions under each general heading was devised so as to suggest to participants the sorts of things that could be discussed should they be reluctant to speak or were unsure of what to say. In practice, once the groups started to become more at ease, the participants became willing to share their memories. The guide was also found to be useful for keeping everyone on task.

Sample selection for the groups depended on the availability and willingness of people in the subject area. Since the interviewees had to have gone to the pictures in pre-television times, senior citizen groups permitted easy access to large numbers. Parkes and Forbes each had two theatres operating concurrently for a time and it was felt that more could be gained by questioning groups in those towns. Parkes' Senior Citizens met monthly, while the Forbes' one met weekly for lunch. Owing to financial constraints on the writer, timing was essential to meet with the two groups in the same week. This was achieved during Easter week (Wednesday in Parkes, Thursday in Forbes). Two groups at both centres were held. The group participants were members of the

c. D.W. Stewart and P.M. Shamdasani. 1990. Focus Groups. Theory and Practice. Applied Social Research Methods Series. Vol. 20. Newbury Park, U.S.A.: Sage Publications.

d. S.C. Weller and A. Kimball Romney. 1988. Systematic Data Collection. Qualitative Research Methods. Vol. 10. Newbury Park, U.S.A.: Sage Publications.

² D.W. Stewart and P.M. Shamdasani, op. cit., p. 61.

respective senior citizens groups who volunteered 'on the day' to be interviewed.³

Rather than rely solely on the groups, another form of supplementary material was sought by publishing 'Letters to the Editor' in the Parkes Champion Post and the Forbes Advocate newspapers. (These newspapers cover the whole of the subject area.) Responses were forthcoming from a number of people, including one lady who had left the area some years before and now resides in Victoria. The letters covered the period in people's memories from the 1920s to the 1960s.

Former theatre managers, their wives and former theatre staff were sought and, in some cases, found. Many had passed away. However, two Forbes' managers provided details of theatre operations and their wives told of what it was like to have a husband 'married' to a theatre. The wife of a former Parkes' manager was found living on the far South Coast of New South Wales and she provided some information and several photographs that included the staff at the Century Theatre, Parkes. Several former theatre staff members gave insights into running theatres and what it meant to them.

It was felt that interviews with Aboriginal people would add an extra dimension. This was prompted by a former theatre manager who told of how he had (because of company policy) refused to sell seats in the Dress Circle to Aboriginal people, telling them that they had to sit downstairs. Aborigines had been part of cinema audiences in the past and it was felt that their memories would be worthwhile including in this study. Despite speaking with the Koori Centre at the University of Sydney (where the idea met with approval), two letters and two telephone calls

³ The Forbes' groups were not without difficulty as they had to be conducted over lunch.

to the Dubbo Aboriginal Lands Council failed to elicit an acknowledgement. It is disappointing because a part of the population in the subject area is not represented in the findings.

All of the interviews and correspondence were transcribed. The data was read and the information conceptualised. One qualitative research text suggested that it would be "*inappropriate to generalize far beyond the members of the focus groups*".⁴ Hence, the writer tried to avoid doing this. However, six categories emerged from within the data gathered. As this thesis was only ever intended to be an historical one (with the inclusion of a certain amount of reminiscences), the temptation to turn it into a sociological study was avoided by stopping at the point where the data was sorted into the categories. Other aspects of coding (ie properties and dimensional ranges) were looked for and established but have not been included in the work as they were considered to be outside the purpose of this thesis. It is an aspect that could be looked into by subsequent research. The categories that emerged were: Attendance; Audience; Motive; Preparations; Recollections; Perceptions. Sub-categories were established within the categories and, in some cases, sub-headings emerged within the sub-categories. They are presented here solely for the purpose of recording them should they be of use to some future researcher.

1. ATTENDANCE -

Sub-categories: Never or Rarely; Infrequently; Once a Week; Saturdays Only.

2. AUDIENCE -

Sub-categories: Family - *Subheadings: Whole Family; Siblings; Spouses Only*

Non-Family - *Subheadings: Mates/Friends; Boy/Girlfriends. Miscellaneous*

⁴ D.W. Stewart and P.M. Shamdasani, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

3. MOTIVE -

Sub-categories: Personal - *Subheadings: Outing; Entertainment; What's On*

Impersonal - *Subheading: Nothing Else To Do*

4. PREPARATIONS -

Sub-categories: Personal Appearance - *Subheadings: Sunday Best; Other Clothing*

Other Arrangements - *Subheadings: Transport; Waiting (queues); Bookings (of tickets); No Bookings; Miscellaneous*

5. RECOLLECTIONS -

Sub-categories: Objective View - *Subheadings: The Buildings; The Staff; At The Show; After The*

Show

Subjective View

6. PERCEPTIONS -

Sub-categories: Suggestive Atmospheres; So, What Was It All About?

The data gained from the qualitative research is included in this chapter. The first part is what the patrons said and the second is from the theatre employees. Its purpose is to give life to The History in Chapter 4.

a. LET'S ASK THE PEOPLE!

The Patrons.

It was a great pleasure to have dealings with over forty people from within the subject area. The material gathered from their reminiscences and correspondence⁵ provides the 'human side' of the buildings' histories. Without the subjective/personal material, the objective histories of the buildings are rather sterile. The individual responses provided insights into part of country life in pre-television days, and thereby add to our knowledge of times past. In another decade it is probable that many of them will have departed from this life. Those who could recall going to the pictures in the pre-'talkie' days of the 1920s (eg the lady at Forbes who played piano for the 'silents', the lady who recalled the Princess in Parkes) have added another dimension to the histories of the buildings. After several readings of the material gathered from the above source, it became apparent that the people were thinking in specific categories: how often they attended; with whom they attended; why they attended; what preparations they had to make in order to attend; and specific recollections about the buildings and the experience of attending. Hence, this section is subdivided into those six areas, each one being dealt with separately.⁶

⁵For the purposes of simplicity, the oral histories and correspondence will be referred to as interviews.

⁶A number of people offered information about going to the pictures in areas outside the subject area. For the most, these have been omitted from this thesis as they do not relate specifically to the subject area. On a few occasions, where it was thought that they amplified a point, they have been included. The last comment of all, although outside the subject area, is a good summary of what many of the people thought.

i. ATTENDANCE:

Despite the high attendances recorded elsewhere, some people did not go to the pictures. For people who live in the city, it may be difficult to believe that two interviewees stated that they never went to the pictures because they had too much to do on the farm. *"Didn't get off the farm"* and *"Didn't get off the farm that much"*. A third said that he was twenty-five before he went to the pictures such were the demands placed on him by the farm. One lady who lived on a farm claimed that she and her husband took their children to the pictures only at Christmas time as a special treat because of their economic circumstances. While each of those interviewed now resides in the towns (three in Parkes, three in Forbes), their comments reflect what the writer's father-in-law (now aged 82) said when being interviewed about the hall at Alectown. As a child and a young man, he was expected to help on the family farm in the pre-mechanisation days of the 1920s-30s and, as he recalled, money was never freely available. Living nineteen miles out of Parkes at West Alectown, attending the pictures and other entertainments was severely limited.

Some people said that they were only able to go to the pictures on certain occasions. One lady said that she only went if her mother was going. Another said that they went during the war years only when her brother, who was in the Air Force, was home and paid for their tickets because her mother could not afford the expense. One lady said that she went only during her courting days while another said that she only went when she was young. Another claimed that there were *"too many other things to do"*.

The majority of the people interviewed claimed that they attended the pictures (before television)

at least once a week. One person's response was that they *"would go to whatever was on"*.⁷ One sprightly lady from Forbes said that she used to play the piano at the open-air Strand Theatre for a few years until she reached the age of nineteen and then gave it away. She said that she preferred *"to sit up the back"* with boyfriends. Those who said that they attended only on Saturdays showed an enthusiasm in their responses. *"Went every Saturday afternoon"*; *"Why, Saturday!"*; *"Sat'dee outing"*; *"Saturday treat"*; *"...went religiously to the matinee"*; *"we would always attend the Saturday Matinees"*; *"...packed Saturday matinees and nights"*.

ii. AUDIENCE:

About half of the interviewees indicated that they attended with their families (either as children or as adults). A number of responses simply used the word *"we"*. From the context of the word, *"we"* could be understood to mean 'the family'. For example, *"We lived out in the country - Dad would take us in..."*.

Young people living out in the country had to rely on adults to drive them into town whenever a trip was needed. This included going to the pictures. If one lady's parents were unable to drive the family into Trundle, the children relied on a neighbour. (Perhaps this indicates a close bond between country people.) Another family used to come into town in a sulky but eventually their father bought a Buick car. Coming into town at Christmas to do late night shopping *"...stayed in with the kids and went to the pictures, and lucky we could do it once a year."* Mum sitting upstairs

⁷ This response was not followed-up but the writer is inclined to take the meaning to be that the person attended the pictures on a regular basis regardless of what films were being screened.

at the Broadway theatre and the children sitting downstairs was mentioned by two people. Even as one girl grew older and moved into the realm of boyfriends, Mum still sat upstairs although the girl and her boyfriend/s sat downstairs. Midnight movies were not unknown in the country and for one lad, mother always came to keep an eye on him. *"Wouldn't allow my boy to go unless I went with him."* Sitting in the front stalls was cheaper for a family. Referring to the Parkes Palace, one person said that *"We mostly sat down the front because the view was better down there. It was cheaper as well."* The pictures were described by one person as a *"family type of entertainment"*. Another said, *"But we all went."* A quick evening meal then off into town to the pictures (although *"father never went"*) was how another lady recalled. An elderly correspondent remarked that in the silent picture days at Bogan Gate, the novelty of going to the pictures was in no way lessened because one accompanied one's parents. Another interviewee reminisced that after the pictures in Parkes, her father would walk down to the old pie cart and the family would eat hot pies on the way home. One lady said that before her father died in the 1950s, he *"would always come to the show with us"*, especially liking it when Bob Hope and Bing Crosby were in the picture. A Trundle interviewee recalled people in wheelchairs attending the pictures at the Weston Star theatre (Trundle), so presumably family members would have brought them.

An inquiry was made to several correspondents about child-minding facilities in an attempt to ascertain if parents preferred to attend the pictures by themselves. Three replies were received. In one reply, a Parkes' lady (the one whose father liked Bob Hope and Bing Crosby) explained that she was only eleven when her father died and, prior to that *"Wherever one [family member] went we all went. I can remember our trips to the pictures...My mum would wheel the pram and dad the stroller with my 2 year old brother - we would spread out up the long road to town..."*

In another reply, relating to Trundle, the correspondent suggested that what she was writing was *"...probably pretty representative of other places."* She wrote that sometimes a grandparent or a neighbour might be relied upon to mind a child. More often, children accompanied their parents. Babies were nursed inside the theatre and were taken out if they became noisy. Small children also accompanied their parents. It was not unusual for children to be left asleep in the cars parked outside the theatre. *"Sometimes police would interrupt the film to say a child was crying in a car and give the registration number and the parents would go out to attend to the child. But usually they slept through the both films during the evening."* She recalled a specific example of this when her brother's number plate was called because one of his sons was crying in the car outside the theatre.⁸

The last reply mentioned that *"No-one ever paid for child-minding, which was done by a relative or family friend and if people had young children they usually stayed at home."* The same lady went on to recall *"...many people took the whole family to the movies - even babies in prams were a common sight. Parents watched their own children and this worked very well - little children would arrive in pyjamas and dressing gowns & older children would sit up the front stalls. Any disturbance would be quickly dealt with by the owner of the cinema....I'm sure that my memories are similar to most other people of that era, having discussed my ideas with others and they agreed."*

Mrs Townsend, wife of the long-serving Parkes theatres' manager, mentioned that she could recall

⁸ This was corroborated by Mrs J Townsend whose husband managed the Parkes Broadway/Century Theatre. In the case of Parkes, the parents left a message with theatre staff and, if a parent was required to attend to a child who was in one of the cars outside, a slide was put onto the screen during the picture.

parents telling her husband that their children were asleep in the cars. He noted their seat numbers and fetched them when it was necessary.

Besides attending with one's family, some of the interviewees stated that they attended with only part of their families. Five interviewees mentioned that they went to the pictures with siblings (brothers or sisters). For one Parkes' family, so tight were the finances that as a girl, one lady eagerly awaited the arrival of her brother. *"...my brother was in the Air Force and he'd come home and shout us to the pictures and, er, because Mum couldn't afford to give us too much money..."* Another Parkes' lady recalled that *"We had some boy neighbours who went religiously to the matinee."* Another response said that she, her three brothers and two sisters *"...would go into the pictures - we always walked the three miles of rough dirt road"* in order to go to the pictures in Parkes. Three interviewees said that they attended with their spouses. The two ladies went with their husbands, both having gone with boyfriends previously. The one man said, *"I went to the theatre with my wife when we were first married at least, er, once a week."* Since those three people had already said that, as children, they had attended the pictures with family members, it was worthwhile to include this seeming progression of attending the pictures from childhood to marriage.

It was not unusual for people to attend the pictures with friends (or 'mates', as the boys called them), according to eighteen interviewees. At Trundle, one lady said that *"Young people tended to go (to the pictures) on Friday night then go to the two bob hop...on Saturday night."* Perhaps the most interesting of the responses was from a lady who said, *"When we were young we would leave our home about three miles away and on Saturday morning we would call at various friends and we would all go to the matinee."* (One can imagine the group growing as it moved

into town.) Other comments included "...being young louts, (we) went with mates"; "...with your friends". Others stated that, as the development from childhood to adulthood took place, so 'friends' gave way to boy and girl friends. "...had boyfriends - developed on from that"; "As you got older, you went with boyfriends"; "A crowd of us always went together. When you were going out with your boyfriends you sat upstairs"; "Courting days"; "Girls with boyfriends liked sitting up the back". And, of course there was the lady from Forbes who, at 19, gave up accompanying the 'silent pictures' so that she could sit at the pictures with her boyfriends.

Judging by the interviewees' responses, the audience that attended the pictures in pre-television days was comprised of groupings - family or non-family. While there is always the possibility that someone attended by him/herself, not one response indicated this. Hence, it could be deduced that the interviewees looked upon going to the pictures in pre-television days as a social event, an event that required company.⁹ This aspect of attendance could only enhance the experience.

iii. MOTIVE:

If a lot of people attended on a regular basis, and if people attended with others (as part of a social bonding), the question remains 'Why did they go?'

⁹ This may not be the case after the introduction of television and could be further investigated. If television is an entertainment that can be enjoyed on one's own, has this affected the way people attend the cinema?

For a number of people, it was quite simply an outing¹⁰ with social overtones. *"At Christmas - late night Saturday shopping - stayed in with the kids and went to the pictures"; "Sat'dee outing"; "We enjoyed the outing"; "A night out with your friends". And, for a Trundle person, "A meeting place for friends. Most people went on the same night each week and would meet up with much the same families."*

For others, the whole experience was for the entertainment. If one accepts that the word 'entertainment' refers to a diversion, recreation, amusement (ie a special occasion), then the whole activity of going to the pictures (including the preparations, the participation and the aftertime) is part of the sense of occasion. Thirteen people mentioned the word 'entertainment', or had the spirit of the word in their responses, and did not mention going to see particular films. They spoke/wrote in general terms that captured the essence of the experience. *"Rare treat - Saturday treat"; "Went with friends - entertainment"; "Something you always looked forward to"; "Only type of main entertainment in those days"; "Yes, you'd look forward all week"; "Highlight of the week was the Sat'day afternoon pictures"; "It was like TV. There was a magic about it."* On a more specific note was one correspondent from Bogan Gate who wrote that the reason for attending the pictures was, *"In silent picture days, possibly the novelty of it all."* [My underlining.] He also wrote that *"We had genuine bell ringers who would walk around the town calling 'Roll up! Roll up...A good programme!"* There can be little doubt that although the names of the pictures were unknown, unless someone happened to see a poster, the good folk of Bogan Gate attended their little galvanised iron Picture Hall for the sense of occasion that offered them both a chance to get together and to be entertained. One Trundle correspondent wrote, *"In the winter that sixteen mile*

¹⁰The thesaurus gives 'expedition' and 'excursion' as words of similar meaning to 'outing'.

trip to town and back was a freezing experience - perhaps this indicates how important 'the pictures' were." Perhaps the best responses were those that made a comment upon the moral tone of the films screened. It was a *"family type of entertainment"*, said one. A Trundle correspondent, recalled, *"There seemed to be no problem allowing children to watch what was on the screen."*

To a much lesser degree than 'outing' and 'entertainment', some interviewees said that they went to the pictures to see specific types of films. However, problems arise with these responses as some appear to have a degree of ambiguity about them. For example, *"Flash Gordon, cowboy ones, cartoons"* seems to indicate serials, a particular genre and animated pictures. All cowboy films? Even the bad ones?¹¹ Another response exclaimed, *"Loved them!"* Everything? Another person claimed that she liked the newsreels. It would seem unlikely for her to have attended solely for newsreels. One participant remarked on the split week screenings¹² (the only person to do so) and he was able to see different pictures twice a week. Another said she *"had to follow the serials"*, while two others commented that they liked the serials and/or the cartoons. One correspondent wrote that she especially liked the musicals, and films that showed other countries. Only four people actually stated that they went especially for the programme: *"[went especially to see] a*

¹¹ The term 'bad' is used here purely to make the reader think. The degree of 'bad-ness' will differ from person to person.

¹² This meant that the theatre screened a programme for three nights then changed the programme for the next three nights (usually Sat-Mon-Tues; Wed-Thurs-Fri). This could mean that a patron was able to see a different programme on Friday and Saturday nights. The practice had been going on since the early years of film exhibition. According to a List of Exhibitors in New South Wales (showing usual programme changes, etc), compiled by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, dated 9th June 1954, held by the writer, the Forbes Studio Theatre was screening Sat-Mon-Tues, Wed-Thurs-Fri in 1954 and the Parkes Century was screening Fri-Sat-Mon, Tues-Wed-Thurs. No reasons for the two different programming policies have been discovered.

good picture", *"went to see the pictures"*; *"If I liked a movie, I'd go and see it"*; *"If you liked the programme you'd go."* One Forbes' person said that he preferred neither the Studio nor Strand. It depended on what was showing.

There were a number of people who said that there was little else to do. One person stated that *"There was virtually nothing else for the young children to do."* Others simply said: *"Nowhere else to go"*, *"Only place allowed to go"*, *"No other entertainment"*, *"There was nothing else really"*, *"Nothing else to do besides some dances"*. With the New South Wales' hotels not open after 6pm (from during World War I until the referendum in 1954), night time must have been a relatively quiet time in some country areas. *"Night time - no place else to go except pictures."* A perusal of Parkes, Forbes and, to a lesser extent, Trundle newspapers show that balls, dances, social evenings, card parties, annual shows, church bazaars, and a range of sporting events including race meetings were also available on an irregular basis for entertainment. (It is outside the scope of this thesis to delve into the social nature of these.) On the other hand, the pictures were a regular thing from the years before World War I to the 1960s and, to a lesser extent afterwards. Two interviewees who had spent some time in Sydney commented that there was more choice of activities there than in the country. What must be remembered about the people who said that there was nothing else to do is that they did have a choice - to go or not to go. Although this paragraph contains responses that may indicate a perceived, limited choice of social activities in the subject area in pre-television days, those who made these responses said that they chose to attend the pictures. If there was so little else to do (or so little choice), was it the desire for a social occasion that brought them together with others at the pictures? Was it basically a desire to mix in a social activity with other human beings?

iv. ARRANGEMENTS:

It has been shown that people in the subject area attended the pictures with others, that many attended on a regular basis and that they attended mainly because it was an outing or it would be an entertaining experience. The interviewees were asked what, if any, preparations had to be made before setting out for the pictures. The first area of concern was personal appearance¹³. From what was told, today's standards fall far short of yesterday's. Only one lady, who lived on a farm with her family and she and her husband only took the children to the pictures at Christmas time as a special treat, claimed that she went in "ordinary clothes". This would not deny her having to make special preparations in order to spend the time in town. For the others who mentioned personal appearance, it was "Best clothes", "Best clobber", "got dressed up", "Gloves, not hat", "Special occasion - get dressed up", "Oh yes. Sunday best", "Always tried to wear a suit", "Dressed up to go to the pictures in Forbes - slacks, tie. Was expected." One man commented, "In the 1960s, got into a suit - [went] to a city [Sydney] theatre. Everyone was wearing jeans." Another, longer response gave an insight into the past and reminds us of the sense of occasion. "It was a chance for all to dress up, to be special, somewhere to go with your friend or boyfriend... One always dressed up and felt good." One lady described herself, after getting dressed up, as a "Flash lookin' tart!" after making the special effort to dress up. Another commented that, in those days, girls did not wear trousers, jeans and "that sort of thing". Perhaps the whole can be summed up by a comment from the ex-piano player from Forbes who said, "People dressed up when they went to

¹³ It was also mentioned that people 'dressed-up' in order to go into town to shop, to go to church, and for other occasions. However, since the topic is about going to the pictures, this activity was not necessarily always associated with those other activities that required 'dressing-up'. The writer can well-remember his own parents and grandmother when they went to the pictures. They always 'dressed-up' and this occurred as much for the local suburban cinema as it did for the special trips to Sydney to shop and attend the pictures.

the pictures. "If the sense of occasion demanded it, and going to the pictures seemed to do so, it would seem that personal appearance was an important part of the preparations for the occasion.

People's responses revealed that they made other preparations as well. These included transport, waiting in queues, booking tickets, and two miscellaneous responses. Six people mentioned transport - from walking to travelling many miles by horse or mechanical means. Because the subject area is in the country, people from the farms had to make special arrangements to get to town. Distance seemed not to worry them as a lady from Trundle pointed out when she wrote that the *"sixteen miles by car to Trundle on a Friday night for the pictures"* was the norm. Another family relied on their father or a neighbour. A horse-drawn sulky was used by one family until a car was purchased.¹⁴ Comments such as those and the following indicate that distance was not seen as a barrier to going to the pictures. *"People from miles around usually came"; "We walked the three miles of rough dirt road [to Parkes]."*¹⁵ There was a valuable form of transport assistance in the picture buses that ran around the outskirts of Parkes and Forbes, bringing people to the pictures on Friday and Saturday nights. One response commented on this. *"When we lived up the top of the hill [in Parkes], there used to be a bus service."* As there were no other regular bus services in either town, this inducement to attend the pictures was provided by respective theatre

¹⁴ According to P Spearritt, by 1939, only one in four Australian families possessed a motor car. (P. Spearritt. "Cars for the People" in A. Curthoys, A.W. Martin and T. Rowse (eds.) Australians from 1939. Sydney: Fairfax, Syme and Associates, 1987, p.119.)

¹⁵ Mr GH Simpson, a former exhibitor, remembers when he opened at Mt Druitt in 1946. People came from miles around - by car, by horse, on foot. Those on foot carried hurricane lamps and the sight on these lamps appearing out of the blackness of the night as the people approached the Vogue Theatre (an ostentatious name for the local hall) was something he still clearly remembered even in 1994.

managements.¹⁶

Two people recalled the lengthy queues while waiting to purchase tickets. *"Big queue across the foyer to get in."* and *"Queued up out onto the footpath."* Those of us who remember those days have no problem remembering the queues that stretched across the vestibule and out into the street. The queue at the writer's local cinema on a Saturday afternoon stretched past five shops to the next street corner and was continually replenished as those having purchased tickets moved inside and others joined the queue.

For Forbes and Parkes people, if one were prepared and had telephoned or gone in earlier, then booking one's tickets could be arranged. Several people mentioned this aspect of going to the pictures. Two participants from Forbes recalled that they never booked. One said that *"All you did was you walked in, got your ticket..."*, while the other said, *"Can't ever remember booking seats."* Nothing about booking seats was recalled in relation to the smaller venues in the subject area.

Besides the above preparations, two people mentioned other things that they had to do in order to go to the pictures. The first, from Forbes: *"Used to save up bottles, etc to get money to go in."*

The second, from Parkes:

We never had a lot of money so as we grew older - we'd all go picking up cordial bottles from around the town - we'd collect old wool from dead sheep and sell it to the wool-buyer, or gather old newspapers from the neighbours and sell them to the butcher or the chip and fish shops.

¹⁶Picture buses were not unusual in pre-television days in the outer suburbs of Sydney and certain country towns.

v. RECOLLECTIONS:

While recalling places past, it is possible to stand back and view them in a detached manner something akin to the Dreamer at the beginning of du Maurier's Rebecca. Although having experienced those places, we look back on them as though looking through a photograph album. We are 'detached' from them as we gaze at them in our minds, but we are still 'attached' at the same time through our experiences/memories. This idea is not new. David Canter commented on the work recorded in 1951 by biophysical chemist, J Butler. *"Butler expressed strongly the belief that the formulation of organised accounts of experience, making coherent pictures, was a deep necessity for human beings."*¹⁷ How much do we recall? How much do we not remember because of our lack of observance in the past? Our 'detachment' can range from 'aware to unaware'. Buildings that have stood in our communities for decades are accepted as being there and it is only when they have gone or have been altered that we apply the test of how aware we were of them. Some of the people who provided responses were quite aware of the picture theatre buildings because they meant a lot to them. For others, it was a matter of patronising them but not memorising much about them. For some, they could remember specifically detailed items (eg the white stage curtains at the Forbes Strand in the 1920s). For others, it was as much as they could do to remember vague things. Yet, when one considers that the writer was asking people to take their memories back at the very least thirty-two years (to when television commenced in the area), it was surprising how many objective details could be recalled of earlier times.

¹⁷ J.A.V. Butler, "Pictures in the Mind" in A.W. Haslett (ed.) Science News 22. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1951, pp.26 - 34, as cited in D. Canter, The Psychology of Place. London: The Architectural Press Ltd., 1977, p. 185.

Since the buildings were well-known by many simply from their location in town, it was gratifying that many people could recall details about their physical appearance. It was especially delightful to discover a few people who could recall details about the earlier theatres. Of the Parkes Princess Theatre before it closed in 1925, they recalled: *"the back part was cut off and they had seats there"; "ticket box in the middle"; "used to open the back doors in summer time to let fresh air in"; "pretty rough inside - cream or white outside and same inside"; long benches that "were padded"; "used to take the back out now and again when it was very hot and we had open air."*

When one compares these thoughts from the early 1920s with the information in The Histories chapter, one finds that the Princess was, in fact, semi-open air. Another participant remembered the first Parkes Picture Palace - *"very rough board floor...seats were all removable because they used to hold balls there"*. The coloured lights at the Broadway *"made it look nice"*.¹⁸ Someone commented that there were no carpets on the floor at the Palace. The Century at Parkes was remembered for *"a large standing area in the front"* (ie the vestibule). In Forbes, someone had attended the open air Strand before it closed in the late 1920s and another had played piano there. Another remembered that the Strand (enclosed) theatre had white curtains for a while.¹⁹ The same theatre was remarked upon as having *"in early days - comfortable chairs"*. Trundle's Weston Star Theatre was remembered after its 1938 refurbishment, the correspondent giving some details of its interior and mentioning how *"grand"* the place looked now that it had *"new curtains covering the screen"*. A Forbes resident mentioned that the *"scenery"* was different in Sydney city cinemas to that of the country ones. Despite asking him, he could not elaborate any further, although he

¹⁸ Exploring this with the participant revealed that the lights referred to were the ones installed around the proscenium in the 1930 renovations.

¹⁹ This might have been the time when Australasian Films Ltd (part of Union Theatres) operated it and white canvas curtains were part of Union Theatres' trade mark.

said that he knew what he was trying to say. (The "scenery" probably meant interior decoration.) Only one commented in a seemingly negative way. *"Wasn't so much the buildings, I think. It was the movies they put on"* that was memorable about going to the pictures. (Perhaps this person had not thought about attending from the social activity perspective.)

When it came to remembering Theatre Staff, eleven responses were forthcoming from the interviewees. One participant recalled the days when the ushers showed people to their seats. Other comments included, *"Someone playing the piano"*, *"Manager - suit"*, *"No lolly boys in Parkes. Had them in Forbes."* (This latter one was confirmed by a correspondent.) One interesting memory was that *"Several theatres had orchestras. The band used to play outside the theatre from about 7.30 to 8 o'clock - that was at the Princess."* A point of dispute arose when uniforms at the Parkes Century were mentioned. One claimed that only the manager wore anything that resembled a uniform (ie a suit, or an open neck shirt in summer) while another claimed that the manager always dressed up. *"...suit and bow tie - a black bow tie, dark suit."* A later discovery in the form of two photographs of the staff of the Century proved once and for all that the entire front-of-house staff wore uniforms. The lady who supplied the photographs (Mrs Townsend, the manager's wife) had designed the ushering staff's uniforms. One comment referred to the way at least one theatre was conducted. *"Nothing was allowed in the theatre - [the staff] were very strict."* The expression may not have been the best, but the message that the staff kept control during screenings comes across clearly. The question of theatre work being seen as a prestige job in town received the reply, *"I think so. I'm sure so. No idea why though."*

Memories of what it was like being inside the theatre were many and varied. Besides *"if a really good movie [was] on, queued up out onto the footpath"*, *"big queue across the foyer to get in"*,

there were the humorous ones. *"Always noisy the ones that sat downstairs"; "Mum still sat upstairs and we sat downstairs"; "Some people preferred to sit upstairs to be away from the kids"; "I remember friends from the farms - rich in those days - would sit upstairs"; "those upstairs thought they were better"*²⁰. In reference to sitting upstairs at Parkes, one person wrote, *"It cost more to go there but everything was plush - even the run around the outedge - about 3' 6"- 4' high of plush velvet.*²¹ *We would lean over this and see the people below. Mostly lollies or papers were thrown down - I can't remember if I did this."* Two correspondents wrote of the food eaten: *"...lollies, mainly jaffas or fantaes, etc or 6d worth of mixed lollies, of all sorts shapes and sizes."; "I always bought a packet of licorice cigarettes."* Travelling a long way and bringing *"rugs, etc"* to combat the winter's cold inside the Trundle theatre was a vivid memory for one correspondent. As already mentioned above, babies and young children were taken inside the Trundle theatre, but it was not uncommon for children to sleep in their parents' cars that were parked outside the theatre and for the police or theatre manager fetch them when necessary. *"I think this is a great commentary on society during those times - how things have changed - no one would dream of that now!"* Another letter described the usual matinee with its mix of *"the Queen", newsreel, "Craven A ads! - I can still sing the jingle; it makes my 3 sons laugh, cartoons, tense serials such as 'the Shadow' (usually before interval) and then after Interval the main feature..."* One past theatre manager stated that while he was at Forbes in the early 1950s, on Mondays the 'A' grade feature was run first so that people off the land who had a long way to travel could go at interval. Normal practice was to run the 'B' grade feature before interval. One

²⁰ After this comment was made, one man who had spent time at Cootamundra NSW piped-in with *"Just like Cootamundra!"* No research was made into class distinctions in the subject area.

²¹ This *"outedge"* was the low wall at the front of the dress circle, the top of which was padded and covered with fabric.

Forbes person remembered that Lachlan Street (the main street) had cars parked along its centre on Saturday nights with, presumably, the occupants inside one of the two theatres in town.

Once the show had finished, people did not always go straight home. Some stayed in order to extend the 'treat' side of the evening. *"Always ended up in the refreshment rooms after the pictures for a drink, banana split."*; *"[We went] to the cafe [after the show]."*; *"We would have a cup of tea and sandwich and a good talk...made a lovely night out."* A fourth person mentioned that they used to buy hot chips afterwards for the walk home. For another, the trip to and from Trundle pictures during winter was described as *"a freezing experience"*.

Some of the reminiscences went beyond the basic descriptions of objects or events²². They were comments involving feelings about particular aspects of going to the pictures. One person said that she liked the glass showcases at the front of the theatre with their *"black and white papers"* (ie photographs/lobby cards) that foretold of coming attractions and enthused her to attend. Another *"liked the music"* when they had it (being presumably the live music of silent picture days). The lights were *"lovely"*, the seating *"comfortable"*. The Broadway was *"very nice"* before its 1949/50 rebuild. Its back stalls seats were presumably quite comfortable - *"very good - better than front seats"*. As a child, one person sat close to the front at the pictures because it was the *"in place"* to be with one's friends. The importance of interval was commented on by a Trundle person who said that it *"...gave people a chance to talk - in groups. No air-conditioning so went outside."*²³

²² Twelve within the subject area plus four outside it.

²³ A subsequent interview in nearby Wellington NSW revealed that Interval was seen by some as a very important part of the evening at the pictures. *"We'd all get out and see each other at half time, too...You'd meet the others at the film that you hadn't sort of - you'd gone in and you'd sat in the dark, but then at half time there'd be probably someone from the place out of*

How did people behave, besides the noisy ones who sat downstairs? *"You didn't go there just to make a nuisance of yourself,"* said one Parkes participant. The Forbes' staff were *"well-respected"* commented another. Perhaps this paragraph could be concluded by one correspondent who wrote that *"For me also, the Century theatre [Parkes] and pictures, are wonderful memories."*

The following paragraphs are from three letters, the first about Bogan Gate, the second about Bedgerebong and the third about Trundle. The past importance of the pictures to these three places is evident. Mr Lawrence Kearney was born at Bogan Gate in 1919 and has lived there for most of his life. His recollections of the village go back to 1925. In a letter dated 2 February 1994, he wrote:

In 1925 we had the silent movies with the caption printed underneath the picture on the screen. A girl, the local police sergeant's daughter, used to play music (piano) during the programme. We had the genuine bell ringers who would walk around the town calling 'Roll up! Roll up! Nick Spelson's Pictures to-night. A good programme.' And then announce the name of picture...The hall served for Balls...After the silent pictures we had the skating rink and I learned to skate there...After the demise of the skating rink, Mr Tom's travelling pictures came to the Tolhurst Hall. He called his show 'the Amusu Talkies'...

Why did we go? In silent picture days, possibly the novelty of it all and one accompanying one's parents, among other things to see 'Felix the Cat', the Biblical story 'The King of Kings', and one which has had an impression on me all my life 'The Volga

town that side that you hadn't seen."

Boatmen'...

In a letter to the Central Western Daily in 1983, Dr W J Peasely (then residing in Western Australia) wrote a tribute to Allan Tom and his touring shows.²⁴ He related how, as a boy, he had lived in Warroo near Bedgerebong and saw his first film in 1933. The family drove to Bedgerebong to the marquee that had been erected opposite the general store.

It was always a great sight for us to see your van parked in front of the hall as we came home from school on the big day. We would rush home, and the chores that were usually performed with reluctance were cheerfully and quickly carried out on 'picture night' so that we could have an early meal and get to the hall as soon as possible, lest we might miss something.

As children, we sat up front on long wooden forms, whilst the adults sat in a little more comfort on folding chairs...Mr Tom, may I express my gratitude to you for all the joy and excitement that you brought to the kids and adults of the bush during the grim years of the depression and post-depression years. Your visits allowed the people to escape from their problems for a short time...

In a letter dated 27 January 1994, Miss Marie Crowley, a former Trundle district resident, recalled

²⁴ KINO, Dec. 1992, No. 42, Australian Theatre Historical Society Inc, Sydney, p. 6. Dr Peasely also mentioned that, after the war, a local school teacher commenced screenings in the local school but this was poor quality compared with Mr Tom's shows. Annual Inspection Reports dating from 21.11.1950 to 6.11.1967. NSW State Archives - Chief Secretary's Dept: Theatres & Public Halls files - Box 10/53102 File T1701 pt 2 Bedgerebong. The Chief Secretary's Dept inspection report of the hall, dated 21.11.1950, stated that no pictures were being shown so perhaps Mr Tom had finished by then and the school was being used.

some of the less memorable things about going to the pictures in the period from the late 1940s into the 1950s.

The theatre itself was very uncomfortable by today's standards. Seats were uncomfortable and it was freezing in winter. The first three rows on each side up the front were of a lesser quality and the kids sat there. Sometimes they got noisy and at least once each week Mr Simmons - who was very tall... would walk up the aisle while the picture was on and say 'Be quiet, children'. I think the actual projectors broke down about once each night - at least once! We were allowed to take any kinds of food into the theatre - lollies, sweets, drinks - nothing was sold inside the theatre...The pictures were extremely important in the social life of the community. It was a source of entertainment in the largely rural area...

vi. PERCEPTIONS:

Going to the pictures in pre-television days was not exclusive of the building in which the patron sat. A sense of place was established in the minds of many people in regards to the picture venues, and the descriptions of such vary from person to person. For some, the descriptions depend on particular patterns of behaviour associated with the places. David Canter²⁵ reminds us of this when he wrote, "...some places may be more specifically described than others. If we think, for a moment, in terms of the behaviour we would expect in a place...then some places...have relatively specific behaviour patterns associated with them." Picture theatre venues established particular

²⁵ D. Canter, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

expectations in their patrons regarding dress (refer to Preparations section above) and behaviour.

*"Environments...are not and cannot be passively observed; they provide the arena for action."*²⁶

The environments created by architects, decorators and exhibitors attempted to suggest that being at the pictures was somewhere special. They were, in fact, 'Suggestive Atmospheres'. It was said above that the staff in Parkes never allowed anyone to be troublesome. This suggests that the behaviour of patrons was monitored, thereby enhancing the enjoyment of the entertainment.

Interviewees commented on the ambience of certain picture theatres. For example, the reopening of the former Broadway at Parkes after extensive remodelling to become the Century in 1951 brought forth this response: *"When the new one opened up and was glamorous, we all went there."* The word 'glamorous' suggests so much - alluring, attractive, dazzling, enchanting, irresistible, fascinating, stimulating, thrilling. A correspondent wrote *"It was wonderful...Those days were wonderful and life seemed so carefree. I too am sad that our Century Theatre will have to be demolished."* What is suggested here is that the theatre building was responsible for many of those memories. Other responses included, *"Excitement"*, *"My memories of the Parkes picture theatre was one of class [referring to the Century]"*, *"There were so many exciting points about the theatre."*

Sense of place was clear in one response that commented on the site of the Parkes Broadway Theatre. *"Broadway Theatre - up near the Broadway Hotel. That was 'The Broadway'²⁷ up that way."* Add to this the sense of occasion created in the mind of someone else. *"It was a chance for*

²⁶ W.H. Ittelson (ed.), *Environment and Cognition*. New York: Seminar Press, 1973, p.14.

²⁷ 'The Broadway' is the name given to the western end of the main street, Clarinda Street.

all to dress up, to be special, somewhere to go with your friend or boyfriend...One always dressed up and felt good." Another wrote, *"My life as a young girl was set around the picture theatre [at Parkes]."*

When inspecting the Trundle picture theatre in early 1994, the writer chanced on two ladies who willingly shared their thoughts about it. The Weston Star was *"the social hub of the town for evening entertainment"*. They dressed up and looked forward to meeting others at the theatre, regardless of what was being screened. Going to the pictures for them (and many others in and around Trundle, they said) was of major importance in those pre-television days.²⁸

For some, the 'Suggestive Atmosphere' was tinged with a comparison with Sydney theatres from among the interviewees. *"Very austere in the country"* was one comment. *"It was just lovely, that's all I can remember - it was just nice"*, said one lady as she recalled the Sydney State Theatre. Another remembered the Chatswood Arcadia and said, *"The atmosphere was special...it just had a feeling about it."* Albury Regent received mention by a correspondent who had visited there when in her 'teens many years before. *"It was unreal. So beautiful and everything plush velvet. At interval we went out a door into paradise...a large waterfall coming out of thick vegetation with fairy lights everywhere...Even now I can still picture that site(sic)."*²⁹

²⁸ Chance interview 20.1.1994 with two ladies parked outside the theatre, eating ice-creams. They said that they were both in their late forties and they willingly shared their memories.

²⁹ The Albury Regent had, and still has, a magnificence about it. The roof garden, the 'paradise' referred to, was situated above the front section of the building and was popular on hot nights during interval. Although the cinema is still in operation, there are only a few remnants of the roof garden visible. The Hoyts Theatre at Albury also had a roof garden.

In the minds of the interviewees of the subject area, their picture theatres are still alive. Perhaps a 55-year old resident of Parkes summed it up when she wrote,

It was a chance for all to dress up, to be special, somewhere to go with your friend or boyfriend. I only experienced that towards the end - actually I sat in front of this boy I'd met once before - I was with a good friend and this person behind kept leaning over the seat to talk to me and the Usher - a man or woman with a torch - would shine the torch at us. This man is now my darling husband of nearly 34 years.³⁰

The final comments in this section give the people of the present the opportunity to have a 'final say' about going to the pictures in the past. The nine comments are capable of standing alone.

Parkes: "It was a sort of meeting place for everybody - your friends who went there - if you didn't go with them, you'd meet them there - you'd nearly always sit in the same row."

Parkes: "Everybody seemed to go there."

Trundle: "The theatre building is still standing...sad, as it holds memories of a bygone era."

Trundle: "The pictures were extremely important in the social life of the community. It was a source of entertainment in the largely rural area..."

Trundle: "Going to the pictures in Trundle was a big social event."

Trundle: "I'd say that the local pictures nurtured a love of movies and for many years I was an inveterate moviegoer."

Forbes: "[The] theatre was the focal point of the town."

Forbes: "Sort of hub in town...Seen as an occasion. Perhaps came to town, shopped, had dinner then went to the pictures."

³⁰ Letter to the writer from Mrs R Mill, Parkes, 25.1.1994.

Bogan Gate: *"It was an escape from reality when Mr Tom, Manildra, brought his talkies."*

The following comment comes from a 70+ year old Wellington lady³¹: While her experience relates to going to the pictures just outside the actual subject area, its poignancy captures the spirit of the whole cinema event.

I can always remember the wonderful feeling of excitement that I've never ever got again as you go in that door and up those stairs with the carpet. It's unforgettable. There was an aura and to me the only other time I ever got a feeling of an aura like that was in a wonderful cathedral. It had an aura about it, y'know. There was the soft music and, as I say, the glamorous person downstairs. Everyone all dressed up. It was an exciting period to go to the pictures.

Perhaps it was this "aura" to which Elwyn Spratt, thirty-two years ago, was referring when he wrote,

*The old Rex, Odeon, Rialto, Royal or Jewel have closed their doors now the magic of their era has drained away.*³²

³¹ The theatre referred to was the Macquarie Theatre at Wellington, built in 1938. It was the first and only theatre in that town to have a dress circle (an upstairs). The "glamorous person downstairs" was either, the manageress Mrs Gertrude Warton, in her evening gown, or one of the smartly-attired usherettes. The speaker of the quoted lines was part of a group of Wellington senior citizens who were interviewed by the writer in mid-1994 in order to test the findings of the qualitative research undertaken within the subject area. (Appendix I) A number of those interviewed at Wellington mentioned that they preferred to sit upstairs because of the better seats, the warmth in winter and the greater sense of occasion. Nothing was mentioned about feeling more superior to those in the Stalls!

³² "Fade-out of the Cinemas", article by E. Spratt in Sun-Herald, 1962. (Day, month and page unknown.) Copy of article in possession of writer.

b. THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FENCE!

Those Involved With The Theatres.

There are many facets to operating a picture theatre. "*The sole purpose of theatre operation is to make money.*"³³ No-one would doubt this statement and the same would apply to any business. Ricketson went on to explain that the success of a theatre depended on the following: Attractions; Policy, Operation and Personnel; Advertising; Constructive Stimulation; Corporate and Physical Structures. Each was a fundamental, he claimed. Without going into detail, it is worth briefly explaining each. The first refers to the film product. Next is how the product is to be presented in order to gain the best financial returns. Thirdly, the entire operation of presenting the product must be thought through and the personnel involved (ie all members of staff) are an important element in the overall scheme of things. Advertising is what sells the pictures and should reflect the character of the theatre and its personnel. Constructive stimulation is "*the character of the house*" or, as Ricketson explained, "*a crutch for operations*". Lastly, corporate and physical structure involves the legal side of the business. What Ricketson wrote about America applied equally to Australia where the picture show men and women of the past had to face each of the above elements. The travelling showmen had to combat travel arrangements and difficulties associated with renting halls. Business managers or representatives usually travelled ahead to set up the halls and advertising. Purpose-built cinemas had to contend with the six elements and, in the case of the open air theatres, had to combat unpredictable weather. It did not change and has not changed up to the present.

³³ F.H. Ricketson, Jnr. 1938. The Management of Motion Picture Theatres. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co Inc, p. 6.

The Film Weekly reminded theatre managers of their responsibilities in 1966 (well after the advent of television) when it reported part of a speech given by John Davis at a film trade function.

A theatre is only a structure, a shell. It is what you do with it which counts...Your theatre has a definite image in the eyes of your patrons. That image is formed by everything they see and hear both on and off the premises. It is a reflection of what they think about your front-of-house displays, your promotions, and tie-ups, your standards of tidiness and good housekeeping - or the lack of them - the attitude of your staff.³⁴

Each state in Australia had its own building regulations, health, fire and safety regulations. Each of these had to be faced by picture theatre operators. As the development of these buildings took place, so did the number of regulations. In New South Wales, while architects were employed to design and execute buildings, the Chief Secretary's Department kept a watchful eye on design and construction through its own officers and the government architect. Regulations regarding the width of stairways and aisles and the number of exits were established in relation to the number of seats. The number of seats could not be varied at an exhibitor's whim. In most cases, annual inspections were carried out by the Board of Fire Commissioners (copies forwarded to the Chief Secretary's Department) and later on by the Chief Secretary's Department. Where this was not practical, a local police report was done. Part of the inspection was to ensure that fire prevention measures and public safety matters in theatres and public halls were being monitored. Screens and maskings, drapes and curtains all had to be sprayed annually with fire retardant. Projection boxes had to be built according to certain regulations in order to stop the spread into the auditorium of a fire. The number of fire buckets was stipulated. Standard gauge fire hydrants and pre-determined

³⁴ Anon., "The Manager's Role" in Film Weekly, 17.2.1966, Sydney, p. 7.

lengths of hose had to be installed and were to be tested annually. Staff had to be trained in fire-prevention and fire-fighting. In the event of a fire or even a fire alarm, the exhibitor had to inform the Chief Secretary. Certain types of locking devices were not permitted on doors. Extra seating placed in aisles (rather than turn people away) incurred the wrath of the Chief Secretary and threats of criminal proceedings were hinted at. Appropriate lighting in 'Exit' signs had to be maintained³⁵. All parts of the building had to be kept clean, including above the rafters. Sanitary arrangements were checked. Ventilation was monitored and air flow tests were carried out. "General practice today, however, is to work on 30 cubic feet per minute per seat; the machinery capable of being adjusted in the wintertime."³⁶ Every day that a theatre was open to the public, it was supposed to be treated with a pulicide.

*...all floors, seats and exposed ground surfaces shall be sprayed with either an emulsion containing at least 4% kerosene, or one part to 40 of water of phenol, cresol, or eucalyptus oil. The whole interior of such buildings shall be disinfected at least once a month.*³⁷

Operating a picture theatre in a country town (or a city) was not a glamorous job that simply entailed standing around in a dinner suit and greeting patrons. Sometimes staff were called upon

³⁵ It was not uncommon up until the 1950s for some theatres and public halls to have kerosene lamps in the exit boxes. The glass in these had to be cleaned regularly, the wicks trimmed and the kerosene topped-up. It was illegal to have an audience in the building and not to light the exit lamps.

³⁶ Film Weekly Motion Picture Directory 1951/52, Sydney, p. 61. "Fire and Health Regulations Governing Australian Theatres". This quotation has been taken from the New South Wales Regulations.

³⁷ A perusal of the Chief Secretary's Department Theatres and Public Halls files at the NSW State Archives will reveal examples of all of these. Film Weekly Motion Picture Directory 1948/49, Sydney, p. 51 gives a list of fire and health requirements for theatres in NSW. In discussion with two past Forbes managers in 1994, both stated that they never sprayed the theatres.

to tackle some back-breaking work. Recalling the days of the 1952 floods in Forbes, David Joel (former circuit manager for Western Cinemas Ltd) stated that staff assisted with taking up the Strand's stalls seats (fixed to the floor) and storing them in the circle (a nuisance job in itself). The real problems started after the flood waters had subsided. The mud and debris had to be cleared away and floor boards had a tendency to warp as they dried. He also stated that the Strand's ticket box was washed out of the front vestibule (there being no front doors on the theatre until 1955) and was never found. Until 1955, when the theatre was remodelled, the watermark left by the floods could be seen halfway up the vestibule walls.³⁸

Perhaps for individual exhibitors, the task of maintaining their theatre was more onerous than for those theatre managers whose theatres were part of a circuit because, at least, a circuit was responsible for maintaining its theatres rather than the resident manager. Why did they all persist? *"The sole purpose of theatre operation is to make money."* But, in 1962, those purpose-built picture theatres in the subject area that were operating were suddenly transformed into large, white elephants. Within a short span of time, their histories were lost, exhibitors died, companies ceased to function, records were destroyed or discarded. Theatre staff members have, in many cases passed away. Those still alive are elderly. This section is an attempt to record a little about some of those people. Only a small amount has been found about individual staff members of the distant past. Names of new managers and owners are sometimes mentioned in newspapers and magazines but little has been recorded about the many men and women who worked in the theatres. The following pieces are offered simply to ensure that these few pieces will not be lost. They are little

³⁸Telephone interview with David Joel, Bellevue Hill 14.1.1994, former Circuit Manager for Western Cinemas Pty Ltd. His job included overseeing the operation of all theatres under that company's control. He later became General Manager of Snider and Dean which owned Western Cinemas Ltd.

more than representative of the many who worked in the picture theatres within the subject area over the years.

During the course of the research, an old screen news magazine from Parkes was discovered, two past managers from Forbes and their wives, Mrs Jean Townsend (wife of Parkes theatres' manager Frank Townsend) were found along with two past staff members. These all help to paint the picture of the 'other side of the fence'.

A 1933 issue of the Parkes Broadway Theatre Screen News³⁹ gave a brief report about members of its staff. (Included in it is a reminder that 'talkies' put a lot of musicians out of work.⁴⁰)

On the staff of the Broadway Theatre are members who were prominent during the days of silent pictures at the various Theatres in Parkes. Foremost among them is Mr. Frank Townsend, Mr. Bisley's first lieutenant, who started as an assistant operator at the old Star Theatre and was later appointed Chief Operator of the old Princess Theatre at the age of 18 years.

Many changes have taken place since then, and, long before the Talkies were introduced to Parkes, Mr. Townsend had studied 'Sound' diligently, so that when the new form of

³⁹ What makes this a special issue is that it is the only known issue to exist. The original is in the possession of Mrs J Townsend and a copy is in the possession of the writer.

⁴⁰ D. Collins, Hollywood Down Under. Australians at the Movies: 1896 to the Present Day. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1987, p. 96. "When the first talkies arrived in Australia in 1928 a whole musical culture was all but decimated: 2000 picture-show musicians were unemployed by December 1929; in Melbourne 64 theatres had abandoned their orchestras; in Sydney the figure was around 100; every cinema in Adelaide had dispersed with orchestral entertainment." There are no known figures for the cinemas within the subject area but they would undoubtedly have followed the pattern in other areas of Australia.

entertainment was introduced Mr. Bisley found in his lieutenant an expert in Talkie machines unsurpassed by any operator in the country.

In Mr. Arthur Wiggins we find an old showman who commenced also at the old Star Theatre as billposter and orchestra leader (they played many parts in those days). Mr. Wiggins served right through the silent days as orchestra leader, and with the coming of the Talkies and the consequent scrapping of orchestras, Mr. Wiggins was appointed Captain of the Circle at the Broadway and 'Sound Monitor'.

His wife is also identified with the present show as cashier, a post she has held for many years.⁴¹

In the case of Parkes, finding people who were former permanent staff members and who knew how the business operated was near-impossible. As Mrs S Budd (the last permanent cashier at the Century) wrote in a letter dated 7 April 1994, *"I have been in touch with a few people but most of the old one's(sic) have passed on..."* The main person who could have told so much about the operation of the Century and Palace theatres was Frank Townsend but he passed away in 1969. He had worked in the cinemas at Parkes since the time of World War I.⁴² His widow, Mrs Jean Townsend, now living on the far south coast of NSW, did write and told a little about being the wife of a theatre manager. From the letter comes the following:

The 33 years of my marriage were very fulfilling years but sadly as the wife of a very

⁴¹ Broadway Theatre Screen News, Special Anniversary and Jubilee Week Edition (1933). No pagination. Original in possession of Mrs J Townsend.

⁴² ibid.

*dedicated and conscientious manager our social life together was almost non-existent. During the winter months, a family outing to a football match: on a Sunday, was our main entertainment and on occasions we would attend the local balls when Frank closed up at 11p.m. Once our three girls were of school age I became very involved with school clubs & activities, also Guiding. I worked in a voluntary capacity with the Physically Handicapped & Mentally Retarded people of Parkes, was a member of the Quota Club and also of the Tennis & Golf Clubs. On occasions I was called upon to travel to other towns on the circuit to collect film which had been misdirected, would not arrive in time for the night's showing also used to fill in for an absent cashier. Frank died suddenly in June 1969...*⁴³

Perhaps the fact that the Townsend family had stayed in Parkes⁴⁴ was the reason that Mrs Townsend was able to become more involved in a variety of activities, unlike the situation in Forbes where the theatre managers changed regularly.

Ever ready to be involved in community projects, the management of the Century arranged free passes for Legacy wards to attend Saturday afternoon matinees during the 1950s. District property owners housed the children who came from Sydney to experience a country holiday.⁴⁵

⁴³ Letter dated 20 April 1994 from Mrs J Townsend, Tathra.

⁴⁴ In a telephone conversation with Mrs J Townsend (25.8.1994), the family remained in Parkes because they preferred to stay, although Western Cinemas Pty Ltd did offer Mr Townsend at least one move.

⁴⁵ R.T. Tindall, Parkes - One Hundred Years of Local Government. Parkes: Parkes Municipal Council, 1983, p263.

One person who was found was Ida Babic, the usherette employed in 1951 at the Parkes Century and who could speak several foreign languages. Babic, a Yugoslavian migrant, arrived with her family in Australia in September 1949 as a refugee. The former air navigation training school⁴⁶ on the eastern side of Parkes (where the airport is now located) was converted into the Parkes Migrant Centre and people from various parts of Europe were quartered there. While they had freedom to travel to Parkes, etc (a bus providing the necessary transport service), many of the older people found things difficult because of language difficulties. Babic, aged 14 in 1949, managed to board with the Townsend family from 1949 until 1955 and worked at the Century as an usherette in the evenings and at Fosseys (a local store) during the day. By 1950, approximately 2000 people were accommodated at the migrant centre and this was increased by another 600 later that year.⁴⁷ When speaking with her on 21 August 1994, she said that having several languages allowed her to help those migrants whose English was not good and this helped to create a certain amount of goodwill between the theatre and the immigrants.

With Forbes, it was possible to locate two former theatre managers and their wives, and a former theatre cashier. Information gleaned from the interviews with them is presented below.

Interview with Vic and Norma Storey on 26 January 1994:

Vic and Norma Storey moved to Forbes in 1953. Norm had started in the picture business as an assistant projectionist at the Rex Theatre, Sydenham. He worked his way up to the position of Relieving Manager in the Sydney Odeon circuit (Greater Union) prior to taking on a new position with Snider and Dean's Western Cinemas Pty Ltd as manager of both the Strand and Studio

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 55.

theatres at Forbes. A house in Prince Street was provided by the company, but it was not rent-free. One of the first things Norm can remember about the Strand was being shown the water mark on a wall in the vestibule from the 1952 flood - half way up the stairs to the dress circle! As with Greater Union, all control was centred in Sydney while Vic, as manager, was merely the 'man on the spot'. The circuit was supervised by a circuit manager and a maintenance engineer who was responsible for the circuit's technical side. Prior to Vic's arrival, Arthur Clark (cleaner and part-time usher) had been in-charge while the company sought a new Forbes' manager.

The Storeys said that they had no real social life and, because they did not have a car, they were forced to rely on walking everywhere. At about 9.30am Monday to Saturday, Vic walked to the Strand. Besides normal office work, local business contacts were made for promotional purposes when necessary. Attention had to be given to the theatre building itself, with minor maintenance being done as and when required. In 1953, staff at the Strand included Arthur Clark (cleaner/handyman), Ray Manahan (projectionist), Bill Dean (assistant projectionist), Betty Rogan (cashier/office duties), and three or four casual ushering staff. The late afternoon saw the Strand office closed and Vic return home for a meal prior to returning to the theatre for the evening screening. During the time that the office was closed, the theatre telephone was switched to Vic's home and bookings would be taken even during mealtime.

Vic was responsible for the smooth operation of the two theatres in town. Betty Rogan would go around to the Studio theatre to collect the takings from the cashier there and return to the Strand with it where it would be counted. When Vic was free at the Strand during the evening, he would walk the two blocks to the Studio to check that everything was all right. At the Studio were a projectionist, assistant projectionist, cashier, and several part time ushers.

Norma recalled that she liked the quietness of Forbes. It was *"a nice town to live in."* While she missed other family members, they had three small children (a fourth was born during their sojourn in Forbes) and she was kept busy. On occasions, when she wanted to see a particular film, she arranged for a babysitter to mind the children. But, this was not often. Other than that and the telephone being switched over, she had no direct dealings with the theatres.

In 1955, the Strand was remodelled to become the new Century. This revitalised the older Strand and Vic and Norma can still recall the excitement of the opening night when local dignitaries and many other people packed the theatre. Afterwards, the supper at the Studio was well-attended.⁴⁸ Vic recalled that, in general, attendances were good and that Saturday matinees and nights were usually packed. He never had any major problems with audience members. The operation was *"quite a viable proposition"*. (But one must remember that Western Cinemas Pty Ltd owned the two shows in town.)

In 1957 Vic resigned his position and the family moved to Parkes where Vic took over as manager at the local Malvern Star Store (bikes and electrical goods). He said that, by then, he had had enough of day and night work. Eventually, because of Norma's health, the family moved back to Sydney.

With Vic's leaving, the position of manager at Forbes was filled by Bill Farthing.

⁴⁸ When shown a photograph of the 'after-the-opening' proceedings at the Studio theatre, Norma was delighted to see herself sitting in the front row. She had never seen the photograph.

Interview with Bill and Peg Farthing on 21 January 1994:

Bill had gained his cinema experience while working for the Kings circuit in Sydney. In February 1957, Bill was supposed to go to Forbes but, owing to a new baby being due in the family, his departure was deferred until July. His wife and family followed Bill to Forbes about six weeks later and moved into the company- provided house. Peg recalled the first social outing with the theatres' staff - a picnic by the river. While 'fooling around' the assistant projectionist, Ken O'Brien, managed to push her into the river.

Fulfilling his role as manager, Bill spent from about 10am to 12noon and evenings from about 6pm each Monday to Saturday at the Century. Betty Rogan, the Century's cashier, arrived at about 10am to handle bookings and undertake other office work. A cashier or the projectionist opened the Studio on the evenings that it was open (Friday and Saturday). About 8 o'clock each night, Bill walked around to the Studio to see how things were going. When a film programme ended its run, the films were taken to the railway station and from there they were returned to Sydney by train. New programmes arrived from Sydney by train.

The picture theatres were seen as focal points in the town, according to Bill. *"It didn't matter what film, basically. Always had a full house."* Peg added that they were the *"sort of hub in town"*. The Century's staff at the time included two projectionists, manager, cashier, possibly two ushers upstairs (depending on what night of the week it was). At the Studio, Reg Barter was the projectionist. Property owners tended to book *"owing to the distance to be travelled"* and, when the Century's office was closed, the telephone was switched through to the Farthing's home. Bill recalled Billy and Ada Green (local identities) who had permanent seats on Saturday nights at the Studio. *"The older people liked it."* *"It had a feeling about it."* These were two comments that Bill

made about the Studio (which he described as being lined with particle board, as having no back stage area, the vestibule having a refreshment counter at the back and a freestanding ticket box in the middle.)

Peg mentioned that it was wonderful the way that *"the managers and staff looked after their patrons in those days."* Young people, if left by their parents, would be minded by theatre staff until the family arrived to collect them. Parents were given no cause for worry. While people tended to dress up for the pictures, especially Friday and Saturday nights, there seemed to be no distinction between those who sat upstairs at the Century and those who sat downstairs, according to Peg. There was a certain amount of status attached to working in a cinema and being the theatre manager. Respect was shown to the manager and the staff and the manager was *"virtually known to everyone in town."*

Being a manager's wife was not easy for Peg. They had no private means of transport and she quite often had little contact with Bill. As she put it, *"days of the weeks just rolled by."* What was the wife's role? As Peg explained it: *"To ensure that the Manager was well-presented."* With many hours of the day spent *"being the manager"*, he had to look the part. Because of the hours that Bill worked, pressure was placed on their marriage and this needed careful handling. Having three small children made things difficult. When their eldest boy (5 years old) suddenly took ill, went into a coma and died, Bill was away relieving in one of the theatres at Orange. The local Forbes doctor had underestimated the child's condition.

Bill returned in 1966 to manage the Century and stayed until 1972.

When asked for an anecdote, Bill told the story of the teenager who, because of extremely bad behaviour towards one of the ushers, was banned for life. (In pre-television days, this was a severe punishment.) About ten months later, the lad approached Bill and pleaded with him to be allowed back in, especially since there was a certain film that was coming and he wanted to see it. He had to apologise to the usher to whom he had originally been rude and then he was let in on probation. The first night back in, Bill and the usher caught him with his feet on the seat and a cigarette in his mouth. When asked to leave, as Bill put it, "*he went without a murmur*" and was banned for life.

Interview with Betty Rogan, former cashier at Forbes, on 21 January 1994:

For about fifteen years, Betty Rogan was cashier at the Strand/Century. Her duties were to act as cashier (sell tickets), take phone bookings, prepare wages sheets, order posters and publicity material, and attend to the mail, banking, petty cash. Wages sheets were sent to Snider and Dean/Western Cinemas Pty Ltd in Sydney and a cheque was returned that had to be cashed prior to the wages being prepared. She saw her job as basically a public relations' one. Starting at 10am she worked until about 11.30 or 12noon. Back at 6.30pm, she stayed until the work was complete, which did not necessarily mean the end of the second feature. After one of the managers showed her how to do the advertising blocks, she prepared these for the local newspaper.

She loved her work and has a lot of happy memories about the people and the staff. Both of the Forbes theatres were "*well-run*" and the theatre staff "*were well-respected*". It was especially good to break 'house records' (ie break attendance records) and one manager, Mr Bill Kennedy⁴⁹, had a wall chart showing highs and lows. Betty was involved with organising special school matinees of certain films and the occasional private screenings for nuns from the local convent who were

⁴⁹ Bill Kennedy was the manager before Vic Storey arrived in 1953.

not allowed to attend the pictures at normal times. At 'full house' sessions, the seats in the two dress circle boxes were sold and extra chairs were placed in the aisles. *"So long as there was a passageway down the middle, everything was fine,"* said Betty. (The Chief Secretary's Department and the Board of Fire Commissioners would not have agreed.)

A comment in the local newspaper by a theatre employee was rare. Only one was found and that was pertained to the destruction by fire of the Forbes Century on 6 December 1984. One resident who had formerly worked as projectionist and cleaner at the theatre, Mr Bill Dean, told a reporter that he could remember many things from the theatre's heyday and that seeing it in flames saddened him.⁵⁰ It was quite possible that Mr Dean spoke for many locals.

Despite inquiries, no other former members of Forbes theatres' staffs have been found. Arthur Clark, Bill Dean, Reg Barter are deceased and two other projectionists ignored letters sent to them. Mrs M Barter replied to a letter and stated that her late husband had *"commenced as operator about 1942"*. But, she explained that *"I am sorry that I cannot furnish you with any technical details, but so many of those involved have passed away."* However, the letter included the following items of interest.

About 1935 or 36 another theatre was built. It was called the Studio, and my husband commenced work there⁵¹. At that time he worked Friday and Saturday evenings and occasionally on public holidays - maybe matinees. As a matter of interest Friday & Saturday evenings netted £1-0-9. Reg was an engineer by trade, but still continued to

⁵⁰ Forbes Advocate, Tues. 11.12.1984, Forbes, p. 27.

⁵¹ This would have been in 1942, although the way the letter is structured, it appears to be from the time the Studio opened.

work at the theatre until well into the 60's.

Only the more recent exhibitors are still alive in Trundle and they date from the theatre's declining days. Mrs Pauline Pike who, with her husband and Mr E J and Mrs I G Pett, operated the Weston Star from 1 May 1958⁵² until May 1964. In an interview on 20 January 1994, she stated that she and her husband had always been interested in pictures and that they took over the theatre as part of a community service, as well as for its business-side.⁵³ In a letter dated 29 March 1994, Mr Pett wrote that he had "*disposed*" of all materials relating to the theatre. Mrs P Pike, who was associated with the theatre in its later years, stated in an interview in January 1994 that 'the pictures' was a big social event and audiences comprised people of all ages. "*It was a family affair*", she said. "*Saturdays always saw full houses while Fridays' houses were always good.*" With the arrival of television, twice weekly screenings were threatened, audiences fell away and "*that was when things changed for the worst.*" Trundle was no different to many towns throughout Australia where going to the pictures had ceased to be an important part of daily life.⁵⁴

Reg Ashcroft (travelling showman in the 1950s to Cookamidgera, Bogan Gate and Alectown) was interviewed on 20 January 1994. While he can recall certain details of those picture show days, he offered little information about the actual operational aspects at the venues and had trouble putting it into a time sequence. He did recall that, about 1936/37, he purchased a hand-wind type

⁵² Letter from Executors of the Estate of the late E J Simmons to Chief Secretary's Dept 23.4.1958. NSW State Archives - Chief Secretary's Dept: Theatres & Public Halls files - Box 10/53174 File T3596 Trundle Weston Star. The letter stated that Mr and Mrs Pett had acquired the business from 1.5.1958 but were only leasing the building.

⁵³ The Pett and Pike families are long time residents of Trundle.

⁵⁴ Interview with Mrs Pauline Pike and Mrs L Hawkins (current owner) 20.1.1994.

of projector and a number of old, silent films. These were shown in a Parkes church hall, in the late 1930s, a silver coin donation being taken. Veteran exhibitor, Alan Tom of Manildra, was interviewed by the writer about his touring circuit⁵⁵ and this material has been incorporated, where appropriate, into Chapter 4.

When one considers the number of people who would have worked in the theatres within the subject area over the years, it is a sad situation that so few are still available to be interviewed (represented above) and that so many have taken their knowledge with them to their graves prior to the research for this thesis being undertaken.

⁵⁵Interview with the writer on 5 April 1994. The writer has recently heard that a biography of A Tom is being compiled. It will make a fine contribution to the Centenary of the Cinema.