
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

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Every week in a calendar year seems to be set aside for celebrating or remembering something whether it be healthy hearts, heritage, or the like. But centenaries are rather special. People tend to take more notice because the publicity machine moves into action and for twelve or so months, promoters attempt to channel people's attention onto one thing. The year 1995 sees the centenary of the exhibition of motion pictures as a mass medium. For Australia, the centenary will fall in 1996. Until now, little has been written about going to the pictures in Australia (especially in rural areas), although one can envisage a 'plethora of tomes' over the next two years on the subject when Australians will have the Centenary of Cinema thrust at them by national and state committees.¹

The libraries and historical societies' museums within the thesis' subject area have little in the way of material or artefacts relating to cinema exhibition. Some local publications have made slight reference to picture exhibition, albeit scanty and sometimes incorrect. (This has been discussed in Chapter 1.) For the architectural researcher, the following buildings are extant: the Osborne Hall and Town Hall in Forbes (the latter was used in a minor capacity for moving pictures, while the former's role is yet to be satisfactorily determined); the Weston Star at Trundle (disused, neglected and, with no plans for renovation or reuse, it is liable to be demolished through neglect and lack of interest); Bogan Gate Memorial Hall (very short use as a cinema) and the Picture Hall (a true

¹ The writer recently learned of a book underway, based on Western Australian experiences. Another book, one that attempts to encompass many facets of Australian cinema, is at present being finalised under the auspices of the Australian Film Institute (in Victoria) and is due for release early in 1995.

relic from the past); in Parkes, the former West's Hall (virtually unrecognisable) and the Palace theatre (filled with secondhand furniture and really only ever a dance hall).² In the light of the material offered in Chapter 4 which traced the histories of the venues, it is painfully obvious that the extant physical remains and documentary records for those buildings, that for many years fulfilled the needs of their rural communities, leave much to be desired.³ A piece of correspondence from the wife of an Australian theatre architect of the 1930s - 1950 succinctly expressed the situation. *"What a pity that humans, collectively, have not been endowed with more foresight than hindsight! There'd be more pride in the preservation of our heritage in all fields of endeavour."*⁴

Chapter 2 of the thesis revealed that Australians strongly supported picture shows in pre-television days and there were many buildings given over either solely or partly to the exhibition of films. The histories of those buildings have not been dealt with in a kindly fashion and this has been discussed in earlier chapters. What has been dealt a more devastating blow has been the social aspect of going to the pictures. Little has been done to record this part of cinema history and the sense of occasion associated with the event. As times have changed and the buildings themselves have all

²The halls in the little villages seem to have fared better. (See Chapter 4.) Yet, they were not built purposely for pictures.

³ The writer, having failed to encourage the Parkes Shire Council (by means of correspondence) to think about potential reuse of the former Century Theatre, asked the writer's uncle-in-law (a member of the local historical society) to attempt to photograph the demolition of the theatre and, if possible, retrieve any interesting artefacts (eg plaster exit box signs). It is believed that a few photographs were taken and a few pieces of plaster retrieved. When it was suggested that a display be arranged in the local museum for the Centenary of Cinema using the retrieved objects and the writer supplying photographs and information, the offer was declined as there was not enough room in the museum and could the writer collect the pieces as soon as possible from the back room.

⁴ Letter from Mrs L Furse, wife of Bruce W Furse (of the partnership Crick and Furse, well-known Sydney theatre architects of the 1930s), 18.12.1994, to the writer.

but disappeared, it is impossible to recreate it. It may have been fortuitous that the qualitative research participants of Chapter 5 have had their memories of going to the pictures recorded. The people who are still able to supply memories of that period are, at present, over the age of fifty. As they pass away, it will become increasingly difficult to come to an appreciation of the place that the picture theatre had in our social history in pre-television days. No-one can expect Time to stand still, but we owe it to posterity to record our history. As one writer expressed it, "*The shape of a city is not static and the needs of the future have to be met as much as the past respected.*"⁵ It is this respect for the past that should concern us. The picture theatre venue allowed us to experience a sense of occasion not offered by any other building as we moved through its "*plethora of thresholds*".⁶ It provided a social experience (and all that that entailed), and a socialising experience (we were taught how to behave - the occasion demanded a certain behaviour from us⁷). It gave us entertainment - visits to places and situations far-removed from our own lives. The writer makes no apologies for not having ascertained what influences the films themselves had on the lives of people. This was never the aim of the thesis but might provide a useful extension should someone care to tackle it.

⁵ A. Lumley, Sydney's Architecture. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1992, p. vi.

⁶ This can even apply to the lowly country hall. The patron moved from the exterior with its outside-facing ticket window, into an entrance area, then into the auditorium awash with electric lights and filled with people.

⁷ This is borne out in L. Halliwell, Seats in All Parts. London: Granada Publishing Ltd., 1985, p. 2 when the author, as a toddler, was taken to the pictures for the second time; the first time both he and his mother retreated quickly when, overcome by the crowds, the darkness and the noise, he started to scream. "...she lectured me firmly on how I was to behave in the pictures, urging me that if I should be frightened or otherwise upset I was to inform her in the smallest of whispers, so that we could take our leave without disturbing other people." Other buildings have influenced how people behave. See J. Earl, "Building the Halls" in P. Bailey, (ed.), Music Hall. The Business of Pleasure. U.K. Open University Press, 1986, pp 1-2.

Woven into the memories of those interviewed (patrons and theatre staff) is the place of the picture theatre in the local community in pre-television times, and it was an important place. The exhibitors' main purpose might have been to make money, but the desire of those entrepreneurs to make that money happily brought about the situation where people came for the entertainment but also, and more importantly, for the social experience associated with the whole event. Thus, the accidental duality of purpose (the exhibitors' and the patrons') was admirably served by the picture venues within the subject area. One might venture to propose that it was the same for all country areas of Australia.⁸ A future study of city and suburban picture-going habits may reveal similar results.

Upon reflection, perhaps the most exciting piece of cinema that was discovered during the research for this thesis was the former Picture Hall at Bogan Gate. It has sat there almost undisturbed for the past 68 years - a piece of history from the days of the 'silents'. In the early 1990s it was successfully adapted into a small cabinet-making concern⁹ and appears to have been little altered since the time of its construction in 1926. It still retains its original projection box, although the wooden flooring in that part has been removed. Of the few 'silent' cinema buildings in existence in New South Wales, not one is as intact as that at Bogan Gate and it deserves to be protected for future generations by means of a heritage listing. Those that still survive have not retained a great deal of their cinematic features. For example, the former Concord Pictures in Parramatta Road, Concord, built of brick with a galvanised iron roof, retains its sloping stalls floor, stage and dressing room. It is currently in use as a factory. The facade, entry area and projection box were

⁸ A focus group was conducted by the writer at Wellington, NSW on 28.6.1994 in order to 'test' the subject area findings. (See Appendix I) The conclusion reached was that the people of Wellington had similar thoughts to those from the subject area.

⁹ Personal observations of the writer 20.1.1994.

demolished about 40 years ago when Parramatta Road was widened. The Alhambra at Mudgee is currently in use as a secondhand furniture store and, apart from the facade and former entry area (with its Wunderlich metal ceiling), there is little else to suggest that it was ever a cinema. At Rylstone there is a building that served as a motor garage during the day and a cinema several nights each week during the 1920s. With the exception of the painted centre aisle markings, a loft area that once served as a projection box and the facade, there are no other cinematic features left. The few other examples available are not anywhere as intact as Bogan Gate. It is this 'intactness' that should ensure that the Bogan Gate Picture Hall be protected so that people in the future can see at first hand what a small rural 'silent' cinema was like. (Figures 60 and 61.) Some may argue that, in the light of what happened in the 1980s to Sydney's Regent Theatre¹⁰ and other important cinemas whose heritage-worth hinged on official hearings, there may be little hope for a galvanised iron shed in the back blocks of the state. What occurred to the Regent et al was a decade ago and the writer firmly believes that Australians are slowly becoming more heritage-minded. What better way to acknowledge the Centenary of Cinema in the subject area and to celebrate the place of the picture theatre in our society than by 'listing' the Bogan Gate Picture Hall? Let us consider for a

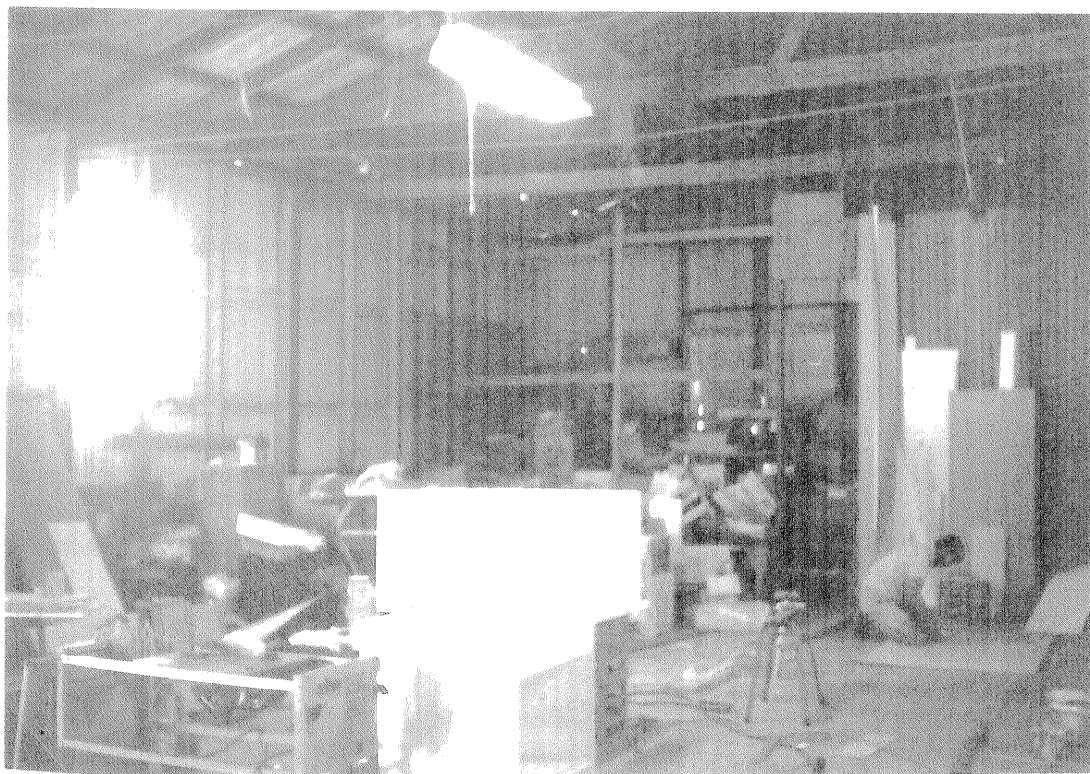
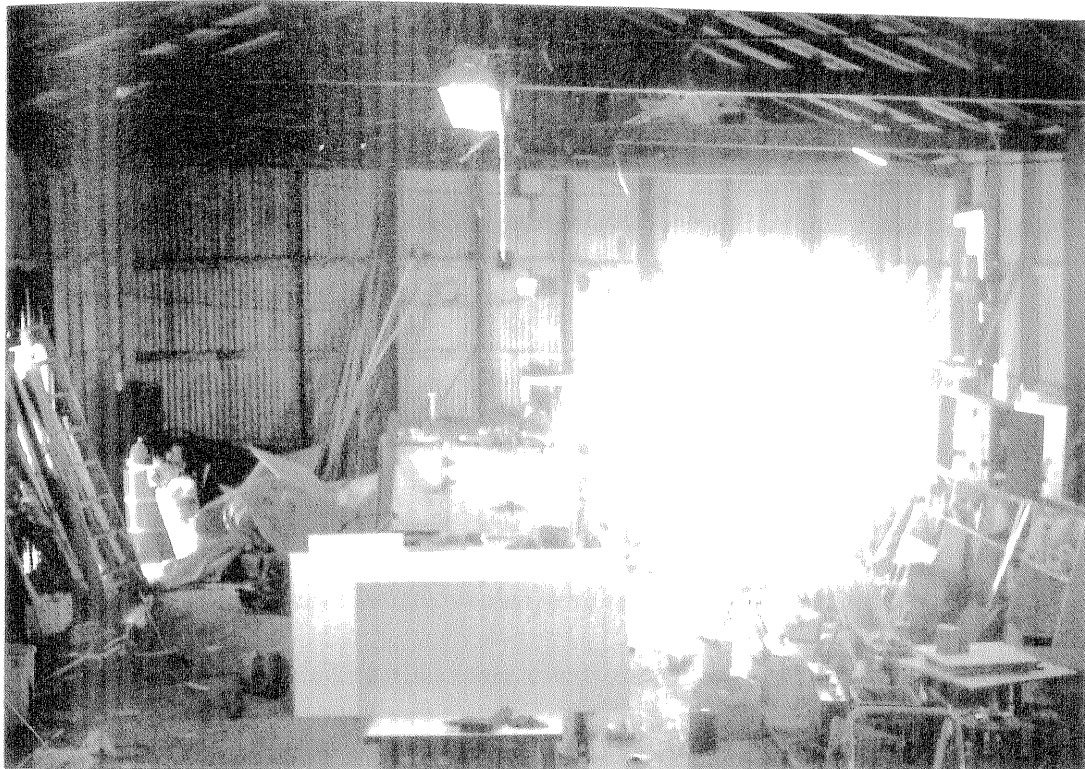
¹⁰ A Permanent Conservation Order was placed on the Regent in c1983. After an appeal from the owners, the order was revoked. Protests followed from interested groups and a Commission of Enquiry was held in 1986 under the terms of the NSW Heritage Act. This turned out to be the longest ever held in this state and resulted in the finding that the government be urged to protect the theatre with a Permanent Conservation Order. At the time, the facade was covered by a Permanent Order and the auditorium was covered by a temporary one. Despite the theatre being listed on the Register of the National Estate by the Commonwealth Government, the State Government took no action. When the new Liberal Government came into office in early 1988, some three weeks after the election, the new Minister for Planning and Environment (Mr David Hay) revoked the orders on the theatre without warning or discussion. In the months that followed, the theatre was stripped and demolition by stealth took place inside the auditorium. By January 1989, the front half of the auditorium had been gutted. After that it was just a matter of time before the rest of the building followed suit. By September, it was gone. (A full account of this matter was published in *KINO*, Journal of Australian Theatre Historical Society Inc, No. 30 Dec. 1989, pp. 9-10.) Other battles during the early 1980s for theatres, such as the Rose Bay Wintergarden (designed by Henry White) and the Manly Embassy/Odeon, resulted in defeat.

FIGURES 60 and 61

Bogan Gate Picture Hall - 1994.

Careful observation of the top view will reveal the projection portholes. The lower view looks towards the stage.

(Source: K J Cork)



moment that such a listing were possible.

At a national level, in order that a site might be considered an important part of Australia's natural or cultural environment, the Australian Heritage Commission produced a set of eight criteria in 1990.¹¹ A brief look at seven of the criteria and their relevant subsections will dispell any doubts about the Picture Hall's potential heritage value.

Criterion A: Its importance in the course, or pattern, of Australia's natural or cultural history.

A.4 Importance for association with events, developments or cultural phases which have had a significant role in the human occupation and evolution of the nation, State, region or community.

The hall was built in 1926 when silent films were a well-established medium in Australia and, by being able to claim that it possessed its own picture venue, the status of the village may have risen. (See footnote 19.) The hall brought together the local community not only on picture nights but for other social activities for the short period from its construction until the early 1930s when it closed.

Criterion B: Its possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Australia's natural or cultural history.

B.2 Importance in demonstrating a distinctive way of life, custom, process, land-use, function or design no longer practised, in danger of being lost, or of exceptional interest.

There can be no doubt that the Picture Hall is an "endangered species" since so few purpose-built

¹¹ Criteria for the Register of the National Estate Application Guidelines. Australian Heritage Commission, April 1990. Copy supplied to the writer by the N.S.W. Department of Planning, Heritage Branch, Sydney.

silent picture theatres remain that have not been extensively altered. It was part of a way-of-life that brought country people together. Its design (being unlined and of galvanised iron and timber construction, with primitive projection and stage facilities) has not been practised in cinema building for the past sixty or so years. Should the current occupier leave or decide to not make repairs to the building, it would be in danger of being lost. The building, while appearing to be reasonably sound at present¹², has received little attention over its lifetime.

Criterion C: Its potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of Australia's natural or cultural history.

C.2 Importance for information contributing to a wider understanding of the history of human occupation of Australia.

Country life has changed since World War II and it is extremely difficult for present day people to appreciate the rural life style of past years. That is why some rural communities have erected so-called Pioneer Villages, but not one has a picture theatre. People living in large towns or cities could never imagine going to the pictures or attending a dance in a primitive, galvanised iron shed. Yet, this was a social centre for the village. Our understanding of rural society can be broadened by seeing the Picture Hall, both by itself and within the context of the village (what remains of it) and trying to empathise with those who once attended it.

Criterion D: Its importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of: (i) a class of Australia's natural or cultural places; or (ii) a class of Australia's natural or cultural environments.

¹² Perhaps this is a commendation for its builder and the materials used.

D.2. Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of the range of human activities in the Australian environment (including way of life, custom, process, land-use, function, design or technique).

The Picture Hall, with its range of functions (ie cinema, dance hall, meeting place, skating rink) witnessed a range of human activities and was part of a now-lost way of life. Besides the auditorium, the projection box is extant as is the lean-to weather 'shed' (?) at the side. The building's design is uniquely Australian right down to the two projection portholes being cut out with what may have been a pair of tin-snips. The rough, unlined interior cannot be claimed as unique to this country but it is certainly part of our architectural heritage from the 1920s and before. Its current use by a cabinet-maker shows that such a building can be successfully re-used.¹³

Criterion E: Its importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by a community or cultural group.

E.1 Importance for a community for aesthetic characteristics held in high esteem or otherwise valued by the community.

Not all cultural buildings are in the same league as the Sydney Opera House. However, the Picture Hall, because of its rustically simplistic construction, is aesthetically important because it was once typical of the many halls in rural communities in the first few decades of this century. While there are many buildings extant in country districts that used this type of construction, there is no other Picture Hall. A number of buildings in the Forbes Pioneer Village and the Wilberforce Pioneer Village are of similar construction. What makes this building unique is that it was built as a picture theatre and not solely as a public hall.

¹³ Another such building was the Majestic Hall at Portland, NSW which was dismantled in the 1960s, re-erected on a property further afield and used as a woolshed.

Criterion F: Its importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period.

F.1 Importance for its technical, creative, designs or artistic excellence, innovation or achievement.

Although constructed in 1926, the building continued an architectural traditional long-associated with rural areas of Australia. While palatial picture palaces (such as the Prince Edward, 1924) were being built in Sydney, country people in small places such as Bogan Gate had to make do with primitive, non-decorated functional buildings. A proper study of the Picture Hall's construction should be undertaken.

Criterion G: Its strong or special associations with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons.

G.1 Important as a place highly valued by a community for reasons of religious, spiritual, symbolic, cultural, educational, or social associations.

The Picture Hall's history has been forgotten by many in the village. It is more than sixty years since it has seen use by its community. However, in its day, it was valued as a symbol¹⁴, it provided a place for cultural activities (films, dances, meetings, skating), it was used for at least one educational film (by the Sunshine Harvester company in 1929) and certainly provided the local community with a place for social interaction (a very important part of country life).

While the above criteria relate to the National Estate, they do not have any binding effect, in general, on state governments (see footnote 12). New South Wales has its own Heritage Act

¹⁴ See Chapter 4 - 1921-1948, footnote 38.

(1977, amended 1979) that was implemented in order to *"integrate heritage conservation into the environmental planning process and to actively share responsibility for the conservation and management of the State's heritage between State and Local government."*¹⁵ As a consequence, a certain amount of environmental heritage protection has been placed, appropriately, in the hands of local government authorities. In 1985 the Minister for Local Government and Planning directed that future local council environmental plans had to make provision for the conservation of heritage items within their boundaries. While local government bodies may be concerned with those items that relate to their own area, it is important for all to remember that items may have regional, State or national significance. Thus it is essential to 'educate' local government authorities who, in some cases, have little understanding or appreciation of the 'place' of the buildings under their care in relation to the wider environment.

Utilising the range of heritage values offered within the Heritage Assessment Guidelines (for NSW), the Bogan Gate Picture Hall can be investigated and assessed under five of the "range of values" listed. (In some ways these are similar to those criteria discussed above.) The "values" are: Historic; Cultural; Social; Archaeological; Architectural. The Hall is, in *historic* terms, "physical evidence" of a period from our past. The Guidelines state that a heritage item "can demonstrate the state of society either at the time of origin of the item or continuously through its life..."¹⁶ Because it is almost intact, on visiting it, one can experience the sense of place that it exudes from therein. It demonstrates "past value systems" of a social nature and "items which clearly

¹⁵ Anon., Heritage Assessment Guidelines. Sydney: Dept of Planning, 1990, p. 1.

¹⁶ ibid., p. 3.

*demonstrate these values...are especially important.*¹⁷ The Hall, because it was built as a picture hall, shows the esteem in which the residents of Bogan Gate held the idea of having a cinema.¹⁸ This *cultural* aspect is not unrealistic as Chapter 4 recalled the construction of numerous picture theatres within the subject area and mentioned comments by prominent people who attended various openings. The Guidelines remind us that *"These items evoke strong feelings of association."*¹⁹ Most of us have been to the pictures at some time in our lives (probably to buildings constructed in post-television times) and we have lost sight of the origins of those places. From an *archaeological* viewpoint, the Picture Hall may expand upon existing knowledge of aspects of construction in rural areas. The Guidelines state that *"Often the fabric of the item itself, rather than its associated historical documentation, provides the necessary evidence..."* to *"...expand upon our knowledge of earlier human occupation..."*²⁰ With its wooden floor, it may even be that there are small relics to be found underneath from the time when it was in use by the community. Its *architectural* significance represents a particular style previously stated above. The

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 3

¹⁸ While the following is from 1949 and concerns an outer Sydney suburb, the sentiments expressed may have been the same in Bogan Gate in 1926. Transcription of proceedings at Court of Appeal - Rowland & Ors Vs Payne & Ors - at Parramatta District Court, 5.5.1949. NSW State Archives - Chief Secretary's Dept: Theatres & Public Halls files - Box 17/3498 File 3498 Seven Hills Memorial Hall. The Hall Committee and a prospective exhibitor (G Rowland) had tried twice to have the hall licence suitably endorsed for the screening of motion pictures. Both times (1947 and 1948) the application had been refused because of opposition from exhibitors in nearby areas. In 1949, they appealed. In the course of the proceedings, Mr Asprey (legal representative for the Committee) stated on their behalf: *"We see the other districts around us going ahead, and having a picture theatre and so on, and we thought it was only right that we should try and keep pace with them and, now that the time has arrived, to have our own pictures."* In his judgement, His Honour, Judge Shortland supported a picture show at Seven Hills, and by the end of the year, it had opened for business.

¹⁹ Anon., Heritage Assessment Guidelines. Sydney: Dept of Planning, 1990, p. 5.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 6.

building is "notable, rare and representational".²¹ It is "an early example of a particular architectural development" - the picture theatre that doubled for other social events.²²

Reviewing the above, it would seem that a case exists for, at the very least, a thorough investigation for potential heritage listing of the Picture Hall. As things stand, the building is in use although it is being maintained only at a basic level. "Somnolent decay"²³ best describes the situation and it is probably a lack of general interest from the small Bogan Gate community (who, for the most are unaware of its history) that may allow the building eventually to pass into oblivion. It is the writer's intention to inform the local community²⁴, the local history group and the shire council of the hall's existence and its history (as discovered so far), and suggest that it be considered for permanent preservation.

It is important that a building such as the Picture Hall be further investigated.

One thing is certain, a heritage item destroyed cannot be recreated. It is too late for

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 7.

²² This was not an unusual thing in country areas. Many picture theatres were built in the 1920s and 1930s in rural New South Wales that had flat stalls' floors so that seats could be removed for dances, etc. (The Weston Star Theatre at Trundle was an example from the 1920s. Two examples from the 1930s were The Western Monarch at Gilgandra (1934) and the Regal at Dunedoo (1937).) It was not until CinemaScope (with its large screen that had to be permanently fixed on the stage and the large stereo speakers that were placed behind it) arrived in the mid-1950s that cinemas such as the Western Monarch ceased to be used for dances.

²³ A phrase used to describe the situation of a medieval church in Brittany, France. K. Spence, "Detective Story In Stone" in *Country Life*, 1.12.1977, Vol. CLXII No. 4195, London: IPC Magazines Ltd., p1618.

²⁴ When first inspected in January 1994, the owners of the property had no idea of its history. They had moved to the area from Sydney some years before and had taken over the running of the general store. During 1994, the writer gave a short history of the hall to them and it is kept in the general store, which is adjacent to the Picture Hall, for anyone to peruse.

regrets when further research discovers the pivotal importance of a building demolished because it was previously thought to be of 'only local' significance.²⁵

Perhaps the above criteria should be applied to the other ex-picture venues in the subject area before too much longer with a view to, at the very least, identifying and ranking them from a heritage perspective. But then, what about the remainder of the state?

The twenty-four miles around Nelungaloo is really only a small part of New South Wales. There is a lot of land mass still available in Australia for future cinema researchers to tackle. And, when that is covered, there are many places overseas that, as far as inquiries have shown, have made little or no attempt to investigate the phenomenon of the picture theatre and the relevance that going to the pictures had for the local populace.²⁶ It would appear that only in the United Kingdom and United States of America have people begun to research this aspect of their social history. Australia is sorely lacking in this field of study.

Pre-television times in rural New South Wales owe a lot to the picture venues and to the people who were involved with them. Some may simply wish to express their thoughts by recalling the opening words of a song crooned by Bob Hope in a film from about a half century ago, and say, "*Thanks For The Memory*". While the writer concurs with the sentiments expressed, it would be reprehensible simply to leave the matter at that. We are only just beginning to realise and acknowledge the intrinsic social worth of the picture theatre in pre-television times, especially in

²⁵ Anon., Heritage Assessment Guidelines. Sydney: Dept of Planning, 1990, p. 13.

²⁶ South Africa, for example, did not introduce television until the 1970s and it would be interesting to discover if the wholesale discarding of cinema company files and photographic records has been the same as it was in Australia a decade or so before.

rural communities. However, much more needs to be done, including the assessment of potential heritage value of picture theatres and informing communities who have forgotten the history of those buildings, before they are all swept away by developers in search of the "quick buck".

Communities come to value places which are the settings for important events, or which become symbols of identity and aspiration. Many churches and public buildings are important in this way. They are not just neutral venues for social events, they are important as the symbols and reminders of the events.²⁷

²⁷P. Marquis-Kyle and M. Walker, *The Illustrated Burra Charter*. Sydney: ICOMOS Inc, 1992, p. 11. It is interesting to note that "churches" are mentioned separately to "public buildings". It is worth conjecturing that the picture theatres during their lifetimes probably had more people pass through them and played a more prominent part in our social lives during that same period of time than did the churches.

FIGURE 62

Demolition of the Century Theatre, Parkes - August 1994.

All that remains - the stage house.

(Source: D Unger, Parkes)

