

"That Reminds Me . . ."

Says Mr. A. Sculthorpe

SHADOW SHAPE MAGIC

By GORDON WILLIAMS

Do you remember when the weirdly animated cartoon of a man being stung by a gigantic mosquito ushered in a new era in entertainment? Or when the monstrous "moving picture" of another unfortunate seriously engorging a mouse began a revolution that overthrew almost every throne in the theatre?

Yesterday, in a quiet room within sound of the sea at Elwood, Mr. A. Sculthorpe, former Mayor of St. Kilda, and proprietor of Sculthorpe's Pictures, at the Guild Hall, a master tailor, who left his work-room to become a pioneer "projectionist," news camera-man, film director, and technician, recalled these tremendous events, and the sensations that attended them.

SYNOPSIS—Freddy Fritters, to be avenged on Mr. and Mrs. Mann, dresses up as their rich Aunt Jemima, whom they are expecting to visit them. After he has had many laughs at their expense, they discover his identity. He escapes, and, later, they mistake the real Aunt Jemima for Freddy disguised. They use her, and she disinherits them in favour of Freddy.

ANNOUNCEMENT—A Carnival of Pictures, a Missionary of Civilization. To obtain the most perfect results obtaining any possible flicker, a silver screen, realising the high water mark of men's inventive ingenuity, has been installed. Pictures that live and breathe, and have a very strenuous being.

Mr. Sculthorpe read lingeringly from two little scraps of paper that have in a brief but crowded 26 years, acquired the dignity of relics. He laughed shortly.

"The first," he said, his voice a flickering echo of a flickering past, "was publicity material supplied by the Co-operative Film Exchange on the release of that uproarious comedy, His Maiden Aunt. The second is an advertisement from 'The Argus.' You will see by how much they differ from similar material in those 'super-colossal' and 'magnificently stimulating' days. . . . But have the films themselves changed?"

"Basically, there is much unaltered. Sometimes I think that only the form is different. See this list of contemporary titles—'High Treason,' 'Wrongly Accused,' 'A Little Mother Wants a Mamma,' 'Don't Lie to Your Husband'—quaint, unsophisticated things, aren't they? Yet their fabric was not very unlike the fabric of the 'super-supers' of to-day. Often their plot structures were destined to live on unendingly, although in different guises."

He unwound an old spool, and sooo dozens of feet of celluloid piled in a little heap at his feet.

"The Hen That Laid the Golden Eggs," he said, softly. "What a future it created! Grown-ups, and children, too

created! Grown-ups, and children, too gasped at its pantomimed story and those little sequences in colour—each little picture done so laboriously by hand—was the marvel of the generation. Many will recall it pleasantly. . . ."

Mr. Sculthorpe began showing pictures in 1896, having been inspired by a picture-entertainment in a little shop in Collins street, where now stands the Block Arcade. At the time he was honorary lantern lecturer for the Victorian Alliance, but soon he had mechanisms, made by Stephen Bond, of South Yarra, placed in front of his lantern.

"'Beater machines,' Mr. Bond, a remarkably clever man, called them," said Mr. Sculthorpe. "There were two rivals in the picture world in those days—myself, Alex. Gunn, Johnson, and Gibson. Mr. Johnson practised as a chemist at St. Kilda, and became interested in pictures because his firm made oxygen gas. When we showmen needed oxygen cylinders for lighting our lanterns, we went to him. . . ."

At first Mr. Sculthorpe showed one mixed 80ft. "spool" as the tremendous climax of Band of Hope and Sunday School lantern shows.

"Undoubtedly the star turn was 'The Hove Fire Brigade.' How the crowd shouted, and even screamed, as the horse charged on them out of the picture! Another favourite that will be recalled by many was—remember it was the pre-George Formby era!—'Fun in a Chinese Laundry,' and a certain applause winner was a sequence depicting the relief of a Chinese mission by British sailors. I doubt if Hollywood's most ambitious opus could evoke more enthusiasm, or arouse more amazed comment."

A pioneer of the films in Victoria, Mr. Sculthorpe was also a pioneer in Tasmania.

"I believe I presented, for the North Tasmanian Caledonian Society, the first picture show seen in Launceston," he recalls. "The admittance charge was 1/-, this to see a spool that would normally be put through in 15 minutes! However we handled the film carefully to spin it out as long as we could. Then another I was charged before the second spool was shown. Altogether, we had only four spools, and some of the patrons stopped to see the entire four—each at 1/- a time—again and again."

"We reached a new high in enthusiasm. The night before the first presentation every available bed in Launceston was booked. . . ."

"One of my fondest recollections is the 'shooting' of the picture 'A Melbourne Mystery.'" Mr. Sculthorpe said. "Jack Gavin and his wife were among the principals, and the picture, although it was a little 'starved' because of the promoters' lack of finance, compared favourably with the importations of the time. We were filming a scene in, I believe, the Travellers' Arms Hotel, in Swanston street. The script called for a struggle between a father of a family and a friend who was attempting to drag the erring parent away from the bar. The landlady of the house—the little matter of obtaining her permission had been overlooked—was highly indignant, but the climax came when a policeman raced across and wanted to arrest the actor-brawlers. The camera was kept going—and history was made when the realistic efforts of a member of the Victorian police were captured in celluloid. I believe the poor fellow, when the film was released, had to submit to an unmerciful 'ribbing' from his mates in

film was released, had to submit to an unmerciful 'ribbing' from his mates in the force.

"We shot a wedding scene in the doorway of the Church of Christ, Swanston street and I remember with pleasure and gratitude how the minister not only assisted us with advice but posed with the wedding group. It was a good picture, but the exhibitors gave us little encouragement."

"I remember how, when I ventured into pictures first, people would tell me what a fool I was to neglect my ordinary business of tailoring to tinker with the new-fangled entertainment. One of my clients complained that my workshops in Queen street resembled more a blacksmith's than a tailor's — at the time I was making developing plant — and he departed in a huff and with his order ungiven. How I wish now I had given the tailoring away, lock, stock, and barrel, and given all my time to the 'flickers.'"

Mr. Sculthorpe retired from motion picture show business in 1918—his sons and his employees had enlisted; as Mayor of St. Kilda he was an indefatigable worker for patriotic organisations—but he maintained his active, whole-hearted interest in photographic work.

"I think my most notable 'Budget' picture was that of a tragic Grand National—two jockeys were killed, and I filmed every phase of the accident," he recalls. "The exhibiting theatres made pots of money from the film, but I got no more than my ordinary payment."

And his keenest picture memory? Mr. Sculthorpe hesitates to declare it.

"Perhaps," he says, "it is of how I 'stole' electricity to adapt electric lighting to my pictures. Long before Wirth's Park was built they had a large tent at St. Kilda, and I was showing there one Sunday night when I noticed that the place had been wired for electric. Melbourne itself was not served by such lighting at the time. I decided to try to tap the wires, and by coupling up Lubin and Edison rheostats (they were entirely different things, too) and by other ingenious devices I succeeded. I hate to recall what the electrician said to me when he discovered how matters stood. He told me and my assistant, Herb Hindley, that we might have blown out the whole works. However, I have an idea I was the first to use electric lighting for such a purpose in Victoria."

And now, says Mr. Sculthorpe with a sigh, as he rolls into its case the magic of "The Hen That Laid the Golden Eggs," there are but two of the pioneers left — himself and Mr. Millard Johnson. The others are one with the vanished glories of the old and flickery screen.