

## PLOD ESSAY: Moving Pictures in Wonthaggi

In 1910, miners without their families were hungry for entertainment. They had their football, boxing, footraces and cricket among other things. They also had their band, but, as their wives and children began to join them on the coalfield, they needed more.

What the women wanted was something social and something to dress up for. They began holding dances for any reason any night of the week. Consequently, Wonthaggi was filled with halls of varying types and sizes to hold dances in: Henry's Hall, Whites Hall, Lyceum Hall, Smith's Hall among them.

Eventually, there were letters of complaint in the *Sentinel* that there were too many dances. Enough was enough! The dances never became a thing of the past, but different kinds of entertainments came into vogue: Benefit Concerts and Grand Processions, Picnics and Train Rides, but best of all the Moving Pictures that came with travelling Vaudeville shows to Wonthaggi.

Fredo's New Moving Theatre Royal set up a huge tent near the railway station that could seat 1000 people and brought with them fifteen "star artists" to present the Dutch musical play, "Gertrude of Amsterdam" preceded by a short Vaudeville act and a "picture program". One night only.

Henry's Hall had the Star Serenaders Comedy Vaudeville Troupe and the latest American Bioscope Company for two nights only; "The management has spared no expense... Patrons are assured of a first class performance comprising all the latest songs and dances and the very latest pictures... Front seats 2s, back 1s."

Lyceum Hall and Smiths' Hall had similar offerings, all the halls vying with each other to present the best and newest entertainment. The Smith Bros, however, were the most enterprising of the lot. They offered more entertainments more often: theatre, vaudeville, film, skating, boxing. They were open all day every day, it seemed. And their prices were low. Finally, at the end of January 1911, Smiths' in McBride Avenue announced that, "An up-to-date Electric Lighting Plant has been installed by the Management. No Expense has been spared and everything necessary for screening the Latest Up-to-Date Pictures has been provided. Contracts have been entered into with Messrs. Johnson & Gibson and the Williamson American Amusement Company" Pictures were shown all weekend every weekend finishing on Sunday evening after church hours with a "Sacred Concert"

Smiths' were pulling in the money by the bucket load as indicated by their ads becoming larger and larger in the newspaper each week.

They kept getting bigger and better projectors: the electric Biograph, the Ernmann Bioscope, "an absolutely non-flicker machine". Their Projectionists were given high status as if they were trained scientists and engineers of the highest order. They showed as many as twelve films in a weekend and indicated their length by how many feet of film was on each reel.

The other halls in the district quickly dropped out of the race. However, in 1912, serious competition arrived in the form of the Wonthaggi Picture and Theatre Company established by local shareholders, who could see that there was money to be made in this new moving picture business. With great fanfare, Mr Broome launched the enterprise on 26<sup>th</sup> of June. He said he felt "pleased and privileged to be doing so for success to the Theatre meant success to Wonthaggi and the State Coal Mine. The Theatre could not be successful unless the town and the mine were." He must have spoken for a long time because he managed to talk about the mine, the miners, the railway, the cost of coal, etc. But he eventually got back to the Theatre, "With reference to the building which so many came to inspect, it was planned for the purpose for which it was intended (*applause*)." [*Which is a bit like Antony telling Lepidus that the crocodiles of Egypt are shaped like themselves; Antony & Cleopatra II.7*]

Broome then touched upon a subject, which would eventually bring about the demise of this Theatre, but leave Smiths' Hall still standing. He said, "Some people think pictures shows are demoralising, and view with alarm their growing popularity. But, [I] am not one of that sort. (*applause*). On the contrary, if films are carefully selected, and they are clean and wholesome, they will be found entertaining, enjoyable and instructive."

Smiths' and The Wonthaggi Picture and Theatre Company began a race to the finish. At first Smith's ads were bigger and bolder and offering more feet of film per shilling spent than the Theatre, but slowly the Theatre began to catch up and take over. By Christmas, 1912, the Theatre was in full stride. On 24 December, the last issue of the *Sentinel* for the year, they ran a full-page ad announcing an extravaganza: "The cream of the World's best Actors and Actresses. The pick of the World's best in Cinematography; The finest Programme in Victoria." On Christmas Night and Boxing Day, there would be baby competitions, films, vaudeville, boxing, National Dancing, Operatic Singing, culminating in the showing of "The Edison Masterpiece, *Rock of Ages*". Smiths' ads were not seen in the paper for months after that.

However, if one follows the situation in the papers, it seems that Smiths' Bros. were biding their time. Of course they continued to show films and offered a variety of entertainments that kept them afloat. They,

also, kept quiet as they watched Mr H. Jolly of the Theatre bring in larger and larger audiences with more and more dubious films – movies about murder and rape and horror. Perhaps these films were reflective of the times, since the war in Europe was raging and Wonthaggi boys were dying, but some in the town were dismayed by the unwholesome fare at the Theatre. It took a few years, but finally the churches had had enough. Supported by a movement happening throughout the State, they declared war on Moving Pictures being shown on Sunday, the declaration of which meant that they could vent their anger at the Theatre's policies in public meetings. They put ads in the paper: "Protestants of Wonthaggi! Come to your place of worship next Saturday night at 7 o'clock and hear the truth about Sunday Night Picture Shows."

In August 1916, not long before a referendum for or against Pictures on Sunday, the *Sentinel* wrote: "There is a great deal of feeling about the Sunday Pictures question... for months past there has been a decided 'set' against one of the picture shows, the Wonthaggi Theatre Company, on sectarian lines. Perhaps the management will not admit to the 'set' but it has been talked of on every street corner." The *Sentinel* editors were of the opinion that the boycott – for that's what it was – should be lifted at once. But they were too late. On 4 August 1916, the management gave up and called for tenderers for a lease on the Theatre.

Because of what had happened to the Theatre, the editors believed that the vote to be held on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August would go against Sunday pictures. "If any reliance can be placed upon what is heard in almost all quarters, the Sunday Pictures are down and out," they wrote.

They couldn't have been more wrong. While no one was watching, Smiths Brothers had been busy. For several weeks running they put an ad in the both the *Sentinel* and *Powlett Express*: "The question as to whether the picture halls of Wonthaggi shall be closed on Sunday is one that merits very careful consideration, owing to far reaching consequences. The proposal to deprive a large portion of the public of Wonthaggi of CLEAN, WHOLESOME, RATIONAL ENJOYMENT AND INSTRUCTION on Sunday nights after church hours should be strongly resented because it is a direct attempt to interfere with the LIBERTY OF THE SUBJECT." The ad went on to proclaim that movies on Sundays were particularly important in Wonthaggi because, "In proportion to populations there are more residents living in boarding houses than any other town in the State of like size."

1204 Wonthaggians voted, the vote being 678 in favour of pictures, 514 opposed. Thus the Sunday Closing by-law was defeated and Wonthaggi became, to the great satisfaction of sympathisers, the only town in Victoria to allow films on Sunday. And Smiths' Bros. declared themselves the winner, which, indeed, they were.

The following poem, printed in the *Sentinel* 30 of June 1916, may have helped their cause:

THE DEVIL'S HANDICAP by R.H. Dyer

The archfiend flies with devil eyes  
From earth to regions infernal;  
He rakes the coals o'er the smouldering souls  
In the pit of the fires eternal.

He stokes and pokes with vicious strokes,  
'Til the awful conflagration  
Greedily laps at its prey and snaps  
With the furore of consummation.

'I have played and lost,' quoth he; 'the cost  
I count in souls immortal  
I have led men straight to hell's own gate,  
But they balked in the flaming portal.

'With a strange machine, man-made and mean  
Science and at would block me;  
And they flash the truth of life, forsooth,  
On a snow-white screen to mock me.

'They turned a wheel, and a filmy reel  
Battles the Father of Vices.  
A million feet of sermons meet  
The public ay bargain prices.

'Thrice have I wooed and three times sued  
For the soul of a maiden clever;  
But a lesson gleaned from a story screened  
Lost her to me forever.

'I have coaxed and lied and cunningly tried  
By the power of seduction  
A youth to win to a path of sin,  
A spirit of sure destruction,

'But my deadly foe, the picture show,  
Daughter of art and sciences,  
Thru a shaft of light reflected bright –  
And hurled at me defiance.

'So, I loll and sit by the flaming pit –  
My erstwhile patrons go,  
With joy unfeigned and unrestrained  
To the Motion Picture Show.'

- Carolyn Landon