

SUBJECT : OPEN FOUNDATION.  
AUSTRALIAN HISTORY  
WEDNESDAY 7.00PM

TEACHER : MARGARET HENRY

DATE ESSAY PRESENTED : 30TH AUGUST, 1989.

JENNY NICHOLS

ESSAY : LOCAL HISTORY

PICTURE THEATRES IN THE NEWCASTLE INNER CITY AREA

By 1910, cinema had firmly established itself as a feature of Australian life. It is by no means as apparent today, the cinema was the most popular form of entertainment in the world wars, "the most attended, most popular and the most influential component of our popular culture".

One of the reasons for the success of the cinema was its "easy accessibility, its cheapness and its ability to attract a "picture palace". (The cinema was a "picture palace" because it was a "picture palace" which had "picture organs and orchestras and often featured theatrical acts such as singers, jugglers, magicians and tank drivers as well as showing movie pictures". There were also numerous smaller cinemas in the suburbs. Wallsend had two cinemas, Cocks Hill had its own picture theatre, Newcastle had the Grand Opera Theatre.

As the local cinema afforded the most popular entertainment but also, was the only form of entertainment available in the city. The cinema was near obligatory. The cinema flourished in the city. Of these recently built open air cinema was built in 1916, The Theatre Royal in 1904 and the Civic in 1929. The Lyricum opened in 1906 as part of the Newcastle Hall. It closed in 1919, reopened in 1943, closed again in 1967 and reopened in 1971. The Roma Theatre was formerly the Yaffee Theatre. It opened in 1944 reporting world news events but closed in 1967 due to poor patronage due to advent of the television.

While cartoons, serials and Saturday matinees were the movies' main considerations, juvenile and adult entertainment and its primary purpose was to provide a "picture palace" which provided the cinema's cheap thrills and melodrama. The movies were entertained for the working class. The attraction of handsome cinema houses after the first movie was began the elevation of the movies' tone and class. The 1920s and 1930s saw the glorious age of the picture palace.

When the Strand was built it was claimed to be "the finest theatre in the southern hemisphere". Its décor was a mixture of Spanish and French. The Strand was built by a local veteran, General Spencer, who after being Australia's first lady projectionist disappeared mysteriously after the opening.

The Theatre Royal was another building admired for its architectural significance and was described as "an exceedingly handsome one, and as the finest building which has yet been erected in the western portion of the city. The design and general finish of the building reflect credit to the architect and builder".

The language and endless movie publicity at this time provided the public with constant distraction from everyday business. Countless negative articles recorded everything the movie stars did. Giant posters, newspaper advertising and hoarding displays described with superlatives each "coming attraction". Street stunts or battles were a favorite device with each different cinema, trying to outdo the others with their advertising.

1. C. Baker Well Past Class - An Australian History, 1984, p.33.
2. P. Spencer & C. Baker eds. Australian Popular Culture, Sydney, 1979, p.10.
3. Carter Well Past, p.11.
4. 1916
5. 1916
6. Newcastle Morning Herald, 17.4.1903.
7. Spencer Newcastle, p.10.
8. 1916 p.10.
9. Newcastle Star, 17.5.1974.
10. N.M.H., 10.5.1974.
11. Special Interview with Peter Gilman, 21.7.1989.

By 1920, cinema had firmly established itself as a feature of Australian society.<sup>1</sup> Although such popularity is by no means as apparent today, the cinema, especially between the two world wars, "was the best attended, most criticised, liveliest, and the most influential component of our popular culture".<sup>2</sup>

Probably the greatest attraction of the cinema was its easy accessibility. Almost every small town and suburb boasted if not a "picture palace", then at least a venue where films were screened regularly.<sup>3</sup> Newcastle was no exception. Newcastle boasted luxurious city picture palaces which had Wurlitzer organs and orchestras and often featured theatrical acts such as singers, jugglers, magicians and tank divers as well as showing movie pictures.<sup>4</sup> There were also numerous smaller cinemas in the suburbs. Wallsend had two cinemas, Cooks Hill had its own picture theatre, Swansea had the Graceson Theatre.

As the local cinema afforded not only cheap entertainment but also, was the only form of entertainment, attendance was near mandatory.<sup>5</sup> Cinemas flourished in the city. Of those recently still open the Strand was built in 1916, The Theatre Royal in 1924 and the Civic in 1929. The Lyrique opened in 1906 as part of the Masonic Hall. It closed in 1929, reopened in 1942, closed again in 1967 and reopened in 1971. The Roma Theatre was formerly the Tattler Theatre. The Tattler opened in 1944 reporting world news events but closed in 1965 due to poor patronage due to advent of the television.<sup>6</sup>

While cartoons, serials and Saturday matinees gave the movies a considerable juvenile following, the cinema was primarily an adult entertainment and its principal patrons were women.<sup>7</sup> At first the middle class disdained the cinemas' cheap thrills and melodrama. The movies were entertainment for the working class. The erection of handsome cinema houses after the First World War began the elevation of the movies' tone and class. The 1920s and 1930s saw the glorious age of the picture palace.<sup>8</sup>

When the Strand was built it was claimed to be "the finest theatre in the southern hemisphere". Its decor was a mixture of Spanish and French. The Strand was built by a lone woman - Senora Spencer, who after being Australia's first lady projectionist disappeared mysteriously after the opening.<sup>9</sup>

The Theatre Royal was another building admired for its architectural significance and was described as "an exceedingly handsome one, and is the finest building which has yet been erected in the western section of the city. The design and general finish of the building reflect credit on the architect and builder".<sup>10</sup>

The immense and endless movie publicity at this time provided the public with constant distraction from everyday humdrum. Countless magazine articles recorded everything the movie stars did. Giant posters, newspaper advertising and lobby displays described with superlatives each "coming attraction". Street stunts or ballyhoo were a favorite device with each different cinema trying to outdo the others with their advertising.<sup>11</sup>

1. C. Graham Small Town Cinema - An Entertainment Monopoly. 1984, p35.
2. P. Spearrit & D. Walker eds., Australian Popular Culture, Sydney, 1979, p103.
3. Graham Small Town, p35.
4. Ibid
5. Ibid
6. Newcastle Morning Herald. 12.4.1965.
7. Spearrit Australian. p103.
8. Ibid p104
9. Newcastle Sun. 12.6.1979.
10. N.M.H. 16.6.1924.
11. Taped Interview with Peter Whipper, 23.7.1989.

The Greater Union movie houses stressed to their staff that it was their responsibility to give the public their best service in order to make it the customers' "most thrilling experience of the week". Behaviour of the Greater Union staff was expected to be of the highest standard therefore promoting their theatre as "the best".<sup>12</sup>.

At least in the silent years the public was totally captivated and involved in the film's fantasy. Screen villains were hissed and the heroes cheered. In crowded theatres the din of the peanut vendors and pianolas competed with audience interjections, stamping and shouts.<sup>13</sup>.

The confident mood of these times ended abruptly with the coincidence in the early 1930s, of the "talking pictures" and the nation-wide Depression, both of which affected the cinemas. While the coming of the "talkies" provided a much needed boost for the film industry as a whole, the technical innovations involved in screening them proved too costly and complex for many small theatres, forcing many to close down. A decline in patronage due to the economic recession was also evident.<sup>14</sup>.

The advent of the "talkies" also marked the introduction of the standard cinema program of that decade. It consisted of two newsreels, a support film, followed by an interval, the feature film and then a concluding two reel cartoon.<sup>15</sup>. All this was offered at a charge of one shilling for adults and sixpence for children.<sup>16</sup>.

The coming of sound and the effects of tightened censorship in the 1930s greatly increased community interest in the movies' educational potential.<sup>17</sup>. Everybody had an opinion when it came to films. The vast facilities of the film for propaganda also made the cinema a most powerful component of Australian culture. It was said that the invention of the printing machine was remotely comparable.<sup>18</sup>. The visual nature of the film, the absolute ease with which its message could be assimilated, lay at the basis of all the debate. The film had the "power of forcing an impression on undiscriminating audience that nothing written in books can ever possess".<sup>19</sup>. Such discussions on the influence on the public character were common throughout the inter-war period and reflect the degree of power attributed to the cinema in society.

The cinemas' influence on the public was still evident in the 1960s. The Lord Mayor of Newcastle attempted to block any moves to have Newcastle cinemas opened to the public on Sundays. He stated that the move was undesirable for the public in general as it was a step further towards the seven day working week. He thought that Sunday films would encourage teenagers onto the streets and this would result in packs of hoodlums hanging around the city late at night.<sup>20</sup>.

The cinemas' social conscience was also evident with charity performances being held in numerous theatres. This was a regular occurrence at the Victoria Theatre with the admission charge being a small donation at the Saturday daytime screenings.<sup>21</sup>.

12. Newsnight, N.B.N. Television, 3.8.1989.

13. Spearrit Australian, p103.

14. Graham Small Town, p37.

15. Ibid

16. Interview with P. Whipper.

17. Spearrit Australian, p103.

18. Ibid

19. Ibid

20. Sun, 13.11.1964.

21. Interview with P. Whipper.

Up until the 1950s the cinema was the centre "centre of social intercourse" allowing it to enjoy universal appeal. The age of television, drive-in theatre, clubs and improved transportation had not yet arrived, so the cinema had little competition with which to contend.<sup>22</sup>

There have been further changes in the theatre industry. It is no longer considered economically practical to operate single cinemas in separate buildings. Multi-cinemas can occupy the same groundspace as a single cinema but can screen several simultaneous attractions for a far greater audience for a little more than the same overhead costs as for a single cinema.<sup>23</sup> Although still popular, the cinema does not attract the public as it did in its heyday of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. It is just one of a number of different types of entertainment facilities available, therefore it is unlikely to ever regain its place of importance and influence with the public.

22. Graham

Small Town, p39.

23.

Sun, 27.4.1976.

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Graham, C. "Small Town Cinema - An Entertainment Monopoly", 1984, Newcastle Regional Library.

Taped Interview with Peter Whipper, 23rd July, 1989.

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## SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER : JENNY NICHOLS

INTERVIEWEE : PETER WHIPPER

THEME : PICTURE THEATRES IN THE NEWCASTLE INNER CITY AREA

This is an interview with Mr Peter Whipper at Maryville on the 23rd July, 1989. Mr Whipper is seventy seven years old and has lived in his house at Maryville for all of his married years, raising three sons.

Mr Whipper comes from a theatrical background. His father, who immigrated from Germany in his early twenties was part of a "strong-man" act with his stage name being "Apollo". When Mr Whipper senior finished as a strong-man he moved on to become stage manager of several different theatres in Newcastle.

This paved the way for Mr Whipper junior to step into the world of the picture theatre as soon as he was old enough to work. When the Civic Theatre opened in 1929, Mr Whipper was working as an odd-job boy. This job entailed repairing seats, cleaning, as well as being involved in "skits" on stage advertising the next show that was coming to the theatre.

Advertising was an enterprising part of the picture theatres as all the different theatres were vying for the customers' patronage. One novel way of advertising Mr Whipper was involved with, was when they would drive around on the back of a truck dressed up as the different characters involved in the theatre's next film to be shown. Similarly, he would be dressed as a cowboy and ride a horse down Hunter Street if they were advertising a western film.

Mr Whipper's whole life revolved around the cinemas. He worked seven days a week from seven thirty in the morning until eleven o'clock at night for very little wages. All this time there were few industrial stoppages as the theatre staff seemed to enjoy their work and accepted the long hours.

Cinemas were very popular, with crowds of people lining up for hours to see a movie. Mr Whipper worked his way up the career ladder until he became Commissionaire at the Theatre Royal- a job he was very proud of. Mr Whipper revelled in this prestigious position. The theatre was a grand place to go to. Women would go to great trouble and expense with their dresses and the Commissionaire was there to make sure the patrons enjoyed themselves.

Mr Whipper, although being a recipient of a Hoyts Gold Pass in re<sup>w</sup>ard for his twenty five years work with the firm, does not go to the theatre much. He states it is too expensive, he thinks the quality of the films isn't the same as before and that the atmosphere isn't the same either. Like-wise he would not like to be working in the cinemas today as he does not think the the theatres are and never will be as good as they were before.

TRANSCRIPT

JENNY NICHOLS INTERVIEWING PETER WHIPPER SNR.  
23RD, JULY, 1989.

- JENNY This is Jenny Nichols interviewng Peter Whipper Snr on the history of theatres in Newcastle. The subject is Open Foundation, Australian History. The date is the 23rd July, 1989. This is side one.
- JENNY Mr Whipper, what is your full name?
- PETER Peter Carl Whipper.
- JENNY When were you born?
- PETER 14th March, 1912.
- JENNY Whereabouts were you born?
- PETER Bolton Street, Newcastle.
- JENNY In Newcastle. What about your family? When did they come to Newcastle ?
- PETER Well Mum was born here, in Newcastle. Dad came from Germany, in Hamburg. But I can't tell you the year.
- JENNY Just tell us about your Father's background 'cause that's quite an interesting background - He was a "strong-man".
- PETER Yes. He came to this country - he and his partner as a "strong-man" act. They opened at the Victoria Theatre in Perkins Street, Newcastle. I can't give you the date of that either luv. When he left that he settled in Newcastle, became stage manager of the Victoria Theatre for a number of years and then when the Civic opened in 1929 he became stage manager at the Civic Theatre.
- JENNY And that's what encouraged you to work in the theatre?
- PETER That's right, yes.
- JENNY After your Father....  
So when did you start in the theatre?
- PETER Well, I started a fortnight before the 29th helping Dad with the draperies etc, and the front of the stage - what they call the procemium. That was all the curtains going up over the picture sheet. The Manager at the time was Mr Harry Fenton, he was also Mayor of Newcastle for a record number of years. I remember the morning we were

PETER opening Mr Fenton had me carrying the big ticket box around with him. Where as the patrons handed the tickets to the usherette, she used to rip them up and put the butts into this box. Mr Fenton couldn't make up his mind where he wanted it, down the front glass doors of the Civic near the ticket box or up near the stalls entrance. We must have made eight or nine trips at least. At last he decided and I wasn't sorry 'cause those boxes are heavy.

JENNY Right... So the opening of the Civic Theatre must have been a pretty big sort of event.

PETER It was a big society event, yes. If people today could only see it in its real opening glory, it was a beautiful theatre. All the Newcastle society was there and it was very big.

JENNY You were telling me before that in those days they weren't really the live shows that are held in the Civic now, they were more um....

PETER Prelogues they used to call them. They used to have ..Yes I've got to correct myself there. They used to have certain times, they used to have little turns on there, or when I say little turns, there was one American firm they used to have a saxophone van, but they'd only do about ten or twelve minutes prior to the screening of the main film.

JENNY You were also saying that the films used to go all day and people could go in at eleven o'clock.

PETER That's right yes. There used to be four sessions daily, eleven, two, five and eight. If a person wished they could pay a shilling in those times which is ten cents today and they could sit there for that shilling or ten cents up 'til quarter to five and then they'd come out but nobody would put them out, they could sit there right through. The only exception was on the night sessions. The front circle had to be cleared out at quarter to five so the people that had booked their seats, reserved their seats could go in at quarter to eight to see the eight o'clock session.

JENNY Right, and where the theatres pretty full then?

PETER Oh full, well I can remember when I was Commissionaire down at the Theatre Royal I'd open the gates at half past ten for the eleven o'clock session, we would have a queue (if people know the present situation of the Theatre Royal) the stalls box which was on the side of Steel Street, we used to have a queue from the front of the Royal right up Hunter Street and it used to turn into Steel Street waiting for the theatre to open. The circle was on the opposite side used to go right down 'til National Park Street that's where Waltons are now.



PETER As I opened the door and let them in, we would stop sale, the house was completely full I'd say about half past, quarter past eleven. Well those people would have to wait then 'til quarter to two before they could get in and people used to wait all that time in the queue to get in and that was only the Royal and that was the same around all the other theatres, but at Easter and Christmas it was just hopeless.

JENNY There wasn't any television or there really wasn't much else to do .

PETER No.

JENNY What did the people used to wear? Did they used to get dressed up?

PETER Yes. Well during the day naturally it was just normal dress but especially on a Saturday night there were usherettes but the manager used to always pick a tall girl that looked good in an evening gown at that time and she used to stand up the top of the steps directing the people going up to the circle to the left or the right whatever the number of their seats were and she used to be, well they used to pick a very lovely looking girl that looked well in a dressing gown- gown, that's right isn't it ? She'd direct them and she was especially picked. Of course the usherettes they didn't have to have gowns on, they just had the ordinary uniform. But they used to pick this girl and at those times the usherettes used to get free permanent waves - that was paid by the company you know what I mean.

JENNY Now, what about you were also telling me before that you used to have to go on stage and that was more or less advertising what was going to come?

PETER Well that was what we'd call I think in those days a prologue and there was one picture just for an example of Wallis Burie an old actor in it - The Big House which was Sing Sing in America. Well the trailer would come on the screen and myself and another chap would come on dressed up as convicts in the striped suit and the little pillar hat and we'd have a dim light, a green light showing while the trailer was on the picture sheet and we was on each side of the picture sheet. I'd be rolling a cigarette sitting on a stool, he'd be doing something else and of course when it came "showing next Friday" we had to stand up and point to it, the screen. But if it was a cowboy film we used to around as what they call as "stunts" - street stunt. I'd be dressed up as cowboy and we'd (another mate) we'd get on a horse and we'd ride around Newcastle and suburbs dressed up as cowboys and we'd have a bit of calico painted over the side of the horse naming the title of the picture that was going to start at the Civic next week. But with this Big House prior to the screening or a couple of days before we had about fifty extras all dressed up as convicts and a couple of chaps dressed up as orders with guns and they'd march up and down Hunter Street. Just to draw attention a couple of us would break out

PETER of the march, you know what I mean. The guards would run after us, it was anything to attract attention to the coming picture.

JENNY Right, and did other theatres have the same idea?

PETER Oh yes, Oh yes, it was only them. They'd be in Sydney, anywhere, the idea used to come with a paper from America, from Hollywood suggesting these stunts would be put on in the city where the picture was going to shown.

JENNY Right, if they did that today they'd cause a bit of trouble in the streets.

PETER Oh I think they would and it'd be too dear, the wages today to start it wouldn't be worth it.

JENNY That's right. Talking about wages, what were your wages or what were your working hours?

PETER Well, speaking myself, as I said Dad was stage manager, we used to live in King Street almost opposite the Trades' Hall in Union Street there. I'd go up, sweep the stage on a Monday morning, I'd sweep the stage, I'd get up there about seven, quarter past seven. Dad would get there about half past eight get ready for the street stunt. It was an old T Model Ford with a flat top- a flat bottom on it and whatever it was Dad and I would fix up the old T Model Ford whatever was on. As I said in Happy Days as a lady dressed up as a bride and I was dressed with a top hat on and a dress suit and we'd be driven around town with the sign on the side of the lorry saying " Happy Days is Starting at the Royal" next Friday Well then I'd go around til around five o'clock doing that then I'd come home, have tea, come back and Dad or I would work the eight o'clock interval and then this didn't happen every week but I'd say about every second or third week. My friend and I would go out in an old lorry we'd do what they call "sniping". That would be with one sheet and a bucket or bail of paste and we'd used to go around to any empty fence, any empty shop any empty doorway and paste up these one sheeters with the name of the picture that was going to come on next week. Of course nobody knew anything about that, it was against the law to put it on empty premises or any premises at all but that's what we used to do. And then I'd get home about four in the morning and that would go on and on. Maybe that'd go on for a week and then I suppose I used to get (it was really that long ago I can't remember) but I'd get approximately three pound fifteen a week for all of that.

JENNY So what's that, about seven dollars, something like that.

PETER Something like that.

JENNY A dollar a day. How many days a week would you work?

PETER Oh seven!

JENNY Seven days a week.

PETER Yes

JENNY           What about Sunday trading? Apparently there was a great lot of trouble about opening the theatres up for Sunday because they thought that that would bring a seven day working week in for everybody if they went ahead and did that.

PETER           Well as I was speaking to you previously I said that it'd used to be admission a silver coin, this could be thripence or sixpence (three cents, five cents today) But nobody would if you wanted to walk in, nobody could make you pay because they were free but what money was collected went to a charity and on stage was Mr JJ Kelly and his Orchestra and they used to have about an hour and a half to two hours of playing well was quite - well you know what I mean, people used to enjoy it.

JENNY           Did people used to make fun of them?

PETER           Yes, of course the larrakins used to get in there, they had nothing else to do in those days. The larrakins used to get in there and they'd yell out and everything . Well the chap would come on stage and say would Mr So and So please come around to the stage entrance, he's wanted, and when he used to go around the "chucker-outs" used to get him. Well just asked him not to do it again but it not too friendly a manner if you know what I mean

JENNY           Right, so you had bouncers in those days.

PETER           Like they do today, yes luv. And they needed them more. Now there used to be a chap, if I can mention this, this was going back to the Strand again and he was known as Harris - Black Harris. To memory he was an American Negro and he used to get chaps drunk and shang-hai them onto ships that wanted sailors you know what I mean? Anyhow I'll just mention this at the time he never missed a show at the Strand and then, the whole of the stalls used to be a shilling up 'til twelve o'clock. Well Sydney decided to put up the price of the first twelve rows of shilling and then from twelve rows back from the stalls was one and six. Well when the cashier stopped him he put on a bit of a blue so the cashier called me down I tried to tell him, anyhow the boss heard about it, the manager and he called for me to go up and see him He said if that's Harris let him go and sit up in the front circle if he wants to. Don't get mixed up with him. So that's just a little thing about what you used to do in those days for one and six.

JENNY           You were also telling me a story about when you used be in the Civic Theatre about what used to go on in the ladies' toilets, with the people stealing things.

PETER Yes well, that was down on the ground floor, the stalls- the Ladies toilets and they used to have beautiful mirrors on the walls and beautiful furniture, cushions and one part of it was set off for a play den where if the children played up the mothers used to come in there or put the kiddies in, there used to be toys. Well women used to come in theive the toys 'cause every week we would have to go in, we'd have to go over and replace the toys that were stolen and it was even, women used to go in with a suitcase and they'd have one woman just peeking through the door to the vestibule and if they saw anybody coming in the cashier or that or an usherette to go into the toilet she'd warn the lady but if nobody came in they used to take in a suitcase as I mentioned and take the mirrors off the wall that fitted into the suitcase and just walk out with them. This might sound ridiculous but it went on those days.

JENNY What were the names of some of the big entertainers in those days?

PETER Well what I recall luv was at the Victoria was Bob Dyer he came out with the Marquis Show, it was an all American Show and he used to do his hillbilly act and sing "poor little Richard" I think the name of the song was - "poor little Willy" and he was dressed up as a hillbilly. Well I believe that after the Marquis Show went back to America Bob Dyer decided to stay in Australia and as you remember, if you can he was on the "Pick-A-Box Show" on the TV for many years - he was one of them. Then there was George Wallis Senior, Jim Gerald and there's not many people these days can rememeber that, but there was quite a few - I just can't bring them to memory now luv. But that was at the Victoria Theatre.

JENNY The Victoria Theatre is where Easthams is now, isn't it?

PETER That's right, in Perkins Street.

JENNY There were quite a few theatres in Newcastle at that stage?

PETER Well yes, starting up the east end of Newcastle, coming down from the beach was the Strand, in Thorne Street was the Lyrique, I think it's still called the Lyrique

JENNY I think it is.

PETER And then down at Perkins Street is the Victoria Theatre then further down in Hunter Street just about where the Tower Cinema is now in King Street, well just in front of that used to be the Tattler which was all Newsreel from eleven o'clock up 'til ten o'clock at night was all Newsreel then you went down then onto the Bank Corner and onto the Royal.

JENNY Would people have to pay to see the Newsreel?

PETER Oh yes, just the same. A shilling as I was saying, the same prices as before but that would allow them if they wanted to, to stop there for two or three hours or as long as they liked.

JENNY And also the main owners of the theatres they were still- you were saying they were Greater Union and Hoyts, they were still big names in those days?

PETER The biggest, yeh the biggest.

JENNY And when you worked at the Strand therl was a take-over at one stage.

PETER Well yes, I just don't know what it was about Luv, we just got notice that on a certain Saturday night when we finished at the Strand - I was at the Strand at that time, that the whole of the staff of the Strand had to commence work at the Royal on the Monday and the Royal staff had to come up to the Strand. So that was Hoyts and Greater Union theatres. I don't know what it all meant but that was our orders to do so.

JENNY That was a strange way to do business.

PETER It was....

JENNY Also you would have been working through the war years

PETER Yes as I mentioned about the Yank with hamburgers and that. I made some very good friends with the Americans. One chap came up and asked me in front of the theatre one night, that was our projection box, the buyer box and I was trying to explain, I said why? Well he said I used to be a projectionist over in a theatre in the States. So I introduced him to the boss, he gave permission to this chap I said go up to the operating box and he palled up with the operators so they used to let him just run the show for a while. He was very thankful. We met quite a few good American officers which used to keep me supplied with chewing gum for the kids.

JENNY Did people still go to the theatrl then 'cause they wouldn't have had a lot of money? Did the popularity go down in the theatres?

PETER No Luv. That's what I mentioned, the big queues, I think I mentioned before, we opened at eleven o'clock and there was queues there and people would wait two and two and a half and three and three and a half hours just to get in one session to the other. It was very popular.

JENNY They didn't have TV though so I suppose that was their only outside entertainment.

- PETER And of course when the six o'clock hotels (hotels used to close at six o'clock) the men there coming from work used to drink all they could to get their full before five or six and they'd come in with their wives for the eight o'clock session. Well, you'd see a few drunks around. We had our hands full then, you know. But the men couldn't help it we were very grateful (us chaps that worked out the front) bouncers, you know what I mean, we were thankful when the hotels opened 'til ten o'clock 'cause it was alot different.
- JENNY What about yourself? You worked very long hours as you stated before so what would yo do for entertainment? You would have alot of recreation time.
- PETER No, well we used to get one half day off per week and we'd start up from Monday to Saturday night. So all the staff of all the theatres- usherettes, cleaners, projectionists, barring the managers of course we used to hold a Christmas party at a theatre each year. One year it'd be at the Royal, the next year it'd be the Civic and nobody else except the staff of the theatres could come in. Well believe me, we used to have one heck of a night! But was that was about the only enjoyment we'd get 'cause we'd work all the other time. I used to work myself from half past eight in the morning until half past four, quarter to five as a utility man, which meant I used to repair all the ripped seats, do odd jobs that I could do. I'd finish at half past four, quarter to five, go home and then come back and start again out the front as Commissionaire until eleven o'clock, catch the bus home sometimes at half past eleven, get to bed at quarter to twelve and then up again, the same thing the next day.
- JENNY With the long working hours and the pay wasn't so good either, did the people have strikes?
- PETER Well the whole time I worked there for twenty five years we only had one strike and that was for a week.
- JENNY What was that for?
- PETER Just better, as today Luv, just better working conditions better pay.
- JENNY Did you have Unions?
- PETER Oh yes, very strong. Yes we had the Theatrical Union which was very strong but I believe today, in my day they had two head projectionists or operators and two assistants. They used to do, well one would start at ten o'clock, eleven o'clock finish at four or half past four and the other projectionist and assistant would take over that shift until the end of the show. Now I believe now such is the Tower and that they only have one projectionist and he's got to look after the two theatres. I don't know if that's authentic but that's just what I've heard.

JENNY What about the equipment in the projection rooms, I'd say there'd be alot of change in the equipment. Would they still need two people to run it?

PETER No, well that's a point luv, with today it's easier for one man to work the two shows because in the day when I was in it, it would take two men, but now the reels are bigger, much bigger, they can almost get one picture, one picture I believe right now on one reel, but in my day you had to keep changing every so many hundred feet, you could have so many reels for one picture in my time or the time I'm talking about but I believe now the reels I'm talking about are about that big or something like a tape they can manage easy.

JENNY You would have noticed then that there'd been alot of theatres close down over the last few years.

PETER Oh yes luv.

JENNY What do you put that down to?

PETER Well I just think the high prices, the atmosphere's different, I mean there's no lollie-boys now. As I mentioned ealier to this bit of talk, on a Saturday night it used to be a showplace for women to come to. They'd actually buy new dresses and that to go over to the circle, just go over to the circle and just stand there to like nice and pretty. They used to go and show off their dresses. It was a big thing, that's all people done in those days but now it's too dear to go in luv. I don't think the quality of the film's the same.

JENNY What about yourself, do you go to the pictures very often now?

PETER No. Well I think I showed you a pass earlier from the Motion Pictures, you had to work in the theatre for twenty five years before you could qualify to go into this club I qualified and I got a pass which entitles me to ge into any Hoyts Tower Theatres in Newcastle, no Australia. If I went to Perth, Melbourne all I had to do is to show this pass and my wife and I could go in. I think I've retired twelve years and I've only used it three times.

JENNY Right, so I suppose you watch the TV then, that would be a big thing in the closing of the theatres.

PETER Certainly luv, I like my TV.

JENNY The Civic Theatre, there's currently a bit of talk, a bit of controversey about the theatre being restored, what's your ides on that?

PETER Well what do you mean by restored?

JENNY They're going to pay alot of money and have the theatre done up apparently to its old glory.

PETER Well if they could restore it to it's old glory luv, I'd be happy to see it, because as I mentioned earlier, it was a very beautiful theatre.

JENNY You have a few funny stories too, something about a lion in one of the theatres.

PETER Oh yes so my son just reminded me. It was at the Victoria Theatre, of course they used to have vaudeville shows on then, one of the items was trained lions and bringing to memory one of the lions escaped. It went through the stage entrance, people who know Perkins Street it went up the lane from the stage entrance into Perkins Street and turned near the Crown and Anchor Hotel and was going into Hunter Street when they recaptured it. There was a lot of panic, people were running around but it was just like an old pussy cat, it wouldn't have hurt anybody but the public wasn't to know that and once it was caged up it was alright. My dad, which he was stage manager at the time, he used to get an old funnel from the old kerosene lamps, the glass funnels and when he thought things were too quiet he'd put the glass funnel up to his mouth and roar like a lion which he was pretty good at. Well believe me there was panic in the theatre then, people were running all over the place for nothing.

JENNY Right, so do you think we'll ever see the days when the lions will be back in the theatres?

PETER I don't think so luv. But the atmosphere is all different now luv. I really hate to work in the theatres again, at the present time 'cause they could never be like the good old times it was.