Cultural amnesia and
the birth of film in Canada

by Germain Lacasse

Cinema in Canada was pioneered in Quebec by the French — a fact that historians have quickly forgotten (did they ever know it?) as our small country is only of slight interest to the chroniclers of greater nations.

So it is still largely unknown — at least until today — that the first public cinematographic screening in Canada occurred in Montreal on June 28, 1896, a fact which I have been able to discover. Thousands of words have been written in homage to Lumiére agent Mesguich who amazed New York on his way back to France. Already as of November 1897, the Cinematographe had a competitor that would take over the projection of French "moving pictures" in Quebec and dominate the scene for the next decade. The new apparatus was baptised the Cinematographe, and it was presented by two French citizens from Pont l'Abbé in Brittany: Prof. Felix de Grandsaignes d'Hauterives and his mother, countess Marie-Anne, née Treouret de Kerstrat. At age 56, she, a descendent of the revolutionary statesman Mirabeau, crossed the Atlantic to become the cashier of a travelling cinema. From 1897-1914, she took her son and his naval officer Louis Minier, and an assistant from St. Etienne named Louis Pupier, had achieved a comparable success among Francophones of the then-metropolis of Canada.

Montreal Anglophone newspapers of the day never reported the fact, though they too had been invited to the press screening on June 27. And Canadian Anglphone historians still quote English-language newspapers that report the first Canadian screening one month later in Ottawa.

In Montreal, the newspaper La Presse, holding its centenary this year, was the only newspaper that deemed the event worthy of front-page coverage. The other Francophone newspapers would by and large simply paraphrase La Presse.

But the odyssey of the Cinematographe did not end there. Minier and Pupier played at the Palace Theatre for two months, a phenomenal success for Montreal at the time. From there Minier and Pupier went to the Toronto Industrial Exposition, then returned for the one in Montreal, before touring the main cities of Quebec. Louis Minier returned to France subsequently while his assistant continued touring with an aide named Jackson. Minier returned in the spring of 1897 with a new assistant, Faure. In mid-summer they were joined by Felix Mesguich who had left the United States where the patent war unleashed by Edison rapidly put an end to the Lumiére company's activities in that country. Before returning to France, Mesguich too played at the Palace, followed by another Lumiére agent, M. Prosper, who installed himself on the grounds of the Montreal Exposition and subsequently moved to the Palace. He too was coming from the U.S. on his way back to France.

All these Lumiére agents, bustling about almost as much as the spectators generated by the Cinematographe's incredible popularity, came to Montreal to collect whatever remaining monies America could offer. Their films, L'arrivée d'un train, la démolition d'un mur, and so on, were infinitely superior in quality to the American product of the time. But American businessmen were more aggressive than the Lumière brothers, whose name after 1898, would only be associated with the sale of photographic plates through a branch-office in Montreal at 1835 rue Notre-Dame. While a few more sporadic tours were undertaken in 1900 and 1901 by a new agent, "Prof." F.J. Blanchard, the end of the Lumière era was nigh.

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On the U.S. circuit, summer 1908, as the countess Marie-Anne (in ticket booth) and son viscount Henry de Grandaignes d'Hauterives (in hat) pose with unknown employees before the theatre they had rented in St. Louis, Missouri. Billboard features latest Pathé melodramas.
In 1906 the Hauterives ceased their Quebec tours. In January the Quimetoscope opened in Montreal and in less than two years, transformed its owner into a movie mogul. Dozens of theatres opened throughout the province. Quimet supplied them with projectors, films, commentaries, even newswires produced by himself. For the travelling projectionists, the end had arrived. The Hauterives terminated their career in the U.S. where they had traded in their nomadic life for a certain stability, appearing in rented theatres for several months at a time, specializing in "Parian mimodramas."

For 10 years the newspapers of French Canada had announced the arrival of the Hauterives' Historiographe and sung the praises of their rendition of the Passion. After their departure, nobody ever spoke of them again except for Quimet in his often imprecise memoirs. In France where the Hauterives returned, there would be a similar silence: not even a newspaper obituary when Marie-Anne died in December 1920 at Pont l'Abbe where she had retired after having sold her villas. Local newspapers made no mention of her, even if they did list her among the many spectators of the "American Cinema." Her son Henry got more favorable newspaper coverage at his death: three lines in the Petit Parisien to the effect that a law clerk had died after collapsing in the terrace of a cafe on the rue de Maubeuge, Sept. 26, 1929. Aside from the overgrown tombstone in the Pont l'Abbe cemetery, the Hauterives have neither monument nor commemorative plaque. Only this article and perhaps a book if a publisher can see the light.

Neither the Hauterives nor the operators of the Cinematographe are yet part of the established record; forgotten too are the many spectators who perished yet, for at least a decade, astonished crowds stood wide-eyed before this incredible machine that would not only transform human knowledge and perception, but whose products today define our daily lives.

Notes
1/ Le Courrier de St-Jean, 12-3-1897.
2/ Le Pinonnier, 14-2-1896.
4/ The other Montreal newspapers to comment on the event are: La Patrie, Le Monde, Le Soir, Les Nouvelles, as well as the St-Hyacinthe Courrier for which La Presse reporter freelanced.
5/ Le Presse, 21-9-1896.
6/ Les Nouvelles, 16-8-1896.
7/ Ibid.
8/ Ibid.; also Le Monde (Montreal), 18-9-1896.
9/ Their programs were also carried through English-speaking local newspapers of the time, too numerous to reproduce here.
10/ Le Pinonnier, 4-12-1896.
11/ Le Courrier de St-Hyacinthe, 13-4-1897.
12/ La Patrie, 16-5-1897.
13/ Le Presse, 21-9-1897.
14/ Lovell's. The St-Hyacinthe Advertiser, 15-4-1897.
15/ Georges Sadoul, Histoire générale du cinéma, Vol. II.
16/ L'Avant-courirer de la Côte-du-Sud, 10-12-1897.
17/ L'Eveil, 25-7-1897.
18/ L'Avant-courier de la Côte-du-Sud, 10-9-1896.
19/ The author's Sundial correspondence.
20/ Letter to the editor of the Montreal Star, 10-12-1897.
21/ "The" Evening Telegram, 25-7-1897.
22/ English version of "Le Service d'Historiographe correspondance in the author's possession.
23/ Unpublished letter to the editor of the Montreal Star.
24/ Ibid.
25/ In the book by Quimet's nephew, Les Quimetoscope, Mme Cavelier, Quimet's uncle's claim to have assisted at a public projection by two Frenchmen whom he names August Guen and Andrey Emmanuel, means that both of them became a professor at the Montreal Technical College. Correspondence with partly correct Louis Mosler did return to Quebec in 1898 and became a professor at the Laval University's Montreal Conservatory (not the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers)." Quimet is the only one on record to have spoken of the Hauterives, but he was unaware of their true importance.
26/ Le Cinématographe, December, 1920.
27/ Le Petit Parisien, 25-1-1892.
28/ June 1984 – Cinema Canada/7