

HISTORICAL NOTES

by Peter Morris

THE FIRST FILMS IN CANADA : THE TRUE STORY (1)

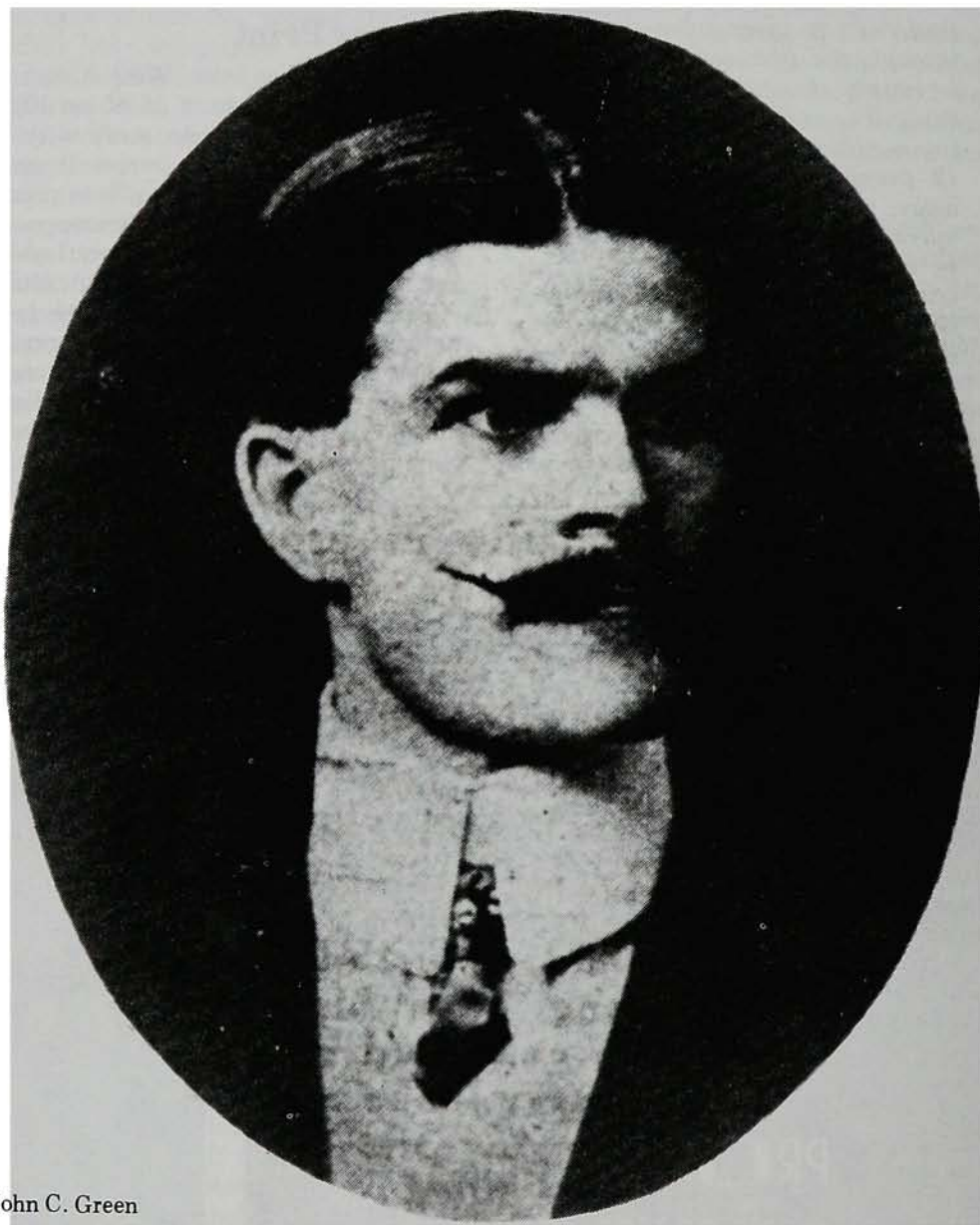
Ottawa

On a warm summer's evening in July 1896, 1,300 Ottawans watched what the *Ottawa Daily Citizen* (July 21, 1896) described as "the first exhibition in Canada" of Edison's Vitascope. Reporting on a preview showing the night before, the anonymous reviewer noted that the invited audience enthused over "the creative genius which made it possible for life-like movements to be depicted on canvas with such extraordinary effect" and became carried away with his own enthusiasm as he described "the perfect representation of the cataract in its downward course or the billow as it curls into foam and dashes upon the beach."

That first exhibition took place in the open air at West End Park, then the westerly terminus of the Ottawa Electric Railway Company and developed precisely to encourage people to travel on the company's streetcars. Ahearn and Soper, owners of the company, regularly presented 'family' entertainment at the park; the movies were introduced as yet one more additional lure for Ottawans to travel on their streetcars. Admission to the show itself was 10 cents but you could buy a round-trip ticket to the park "including car fares, admission and reserved seat" for only 25 cents. It was a bargain at a time when regular theatres charged that much and more for admission alone and boat trips up the Ottawa River cost 50 cents.

The new Vitascope show was a big success for Ahearn and Soper. Long before 8:00 p.m. on that Tuesday evening in 1896 every reserved seat was taken and audiences touched 1,600 on evenings in the first week. Though originally scheduled for only two weeks, the show was several times held over.

Peter Morris, after many years at the Canadian Film Institute, is presently working on a book entitled The History of Canadian Film, to be co-authored by Kirwan Cox. The above account is extracted from the book.



John C. Green

Host of the evening's entertainment was John C. Green – under the name of Belsaz, the Magician. Green was a typical travelling showman of his day. Born in 1866, he was on the road at sixteen, touring with circuses, side-shows and theatrical stock. Though he had never seen the Vitascope, he was not one to miss out on a new gimmick. Learning that Ahearn and Soper had arranged with the Holland brothers of Ottawa to bring the Vitascope

to Canada, he offered to lecture on the new invention, perform his magic act and describe the pictures on the screen. (Films then had no titles and it was the usual practice to have someone on stage identifying the scenes on the screen and adding his own, often humorous, comments.) Green was a great success at this "modern" show and latched onto the movies as a permanent part of his show. For 20 years he travelled

across Eastern Canada and the USA with his movies, sings-songs and magic shows. Most of the itinerant movie-showmen of the time settled down to run permanent movie theatres. But Green stayed on the road until 1917 when he joined N.L. Nathanson's theatre chain and eventually became district manager in Guelph for Famous Players Canada. He was not at all happy in this more ordered and structured life and at one time complained that Famous Players treated him as though "I am serving a life sentence with them." In 1925, he quit and went back to his first love – magic and the stage. He was still active up to his death, aged 85, in 1951.

John C. Green was host for that first movie show; Ahearn and Soper sponsored it. But principally responsible for bringing the movies to Canada were two enterprising Ottawa businessmen – Andrew and George Holland.

The Holland brothers exemplify that special entrepreneurial urge that characterized the Victorian era. They could turn their hands to almost anything – and make money. They had been part-owners of the *Ottawa Daily Citizen* until 1875 when they became the first Senate reporters. They were publishers and booksellers and ran a stenographic service. From their offices on Elgin Street they were agents for such 19th century wonders as the Edison Phonograph, the Sorley battery and the Smith Premier typewriter. Andrew had even travelled to Australia where he had been instrumental in establishing a steamship service between Vancouver and Sidney. It surprised their acquaintances not at all when the Hollands involved themselves with yet another newfangled contraption motion pictures.

In fact, their involvement with the movies goes back before the Vitascope (which projected movies onto a screen for large audience viewing) to the Kinetoscope, a "peep-show" device which was the precursor of the movies as we know them but which allowed only one person at a time to see the film. The Kinetoscope had been perfected by W.K.L. Dickson in the laboratories of Thomas Edison in

1889 but Edison considered it a toy and was not impressed by its commercial possibilities. It took some years for the Kinetoscopes to reach the marketplace but when they did the agents who launched them were the Holland brothers of Ottawa. On April 14, 1894, the Hollands opened the world's first Kinetoscope Parlor at 1155 Broadway in New York. It was an instant success, a success echoed worldwide as hundreds of similar parlors opened. Edison was delighted and wrote to the Hollands in Ottawa to express his pleasure and to "hope your firm will continue to be associated with its (the Kinetoscope's) further exploitation."

It is likely the Hollands hoped so too. The Kinetoscopes were wholesaled by Edison for \$200 and retailed for \$300-\$350.

Edison was now convinced motion pictures had a future – albeit a short one, he predicted – and two years later put his name on a machine invented by Thomas Armat that could project movies onto a screen. "Edison's" Vitascope was first presented in New York on April 23, 1896 to instant public acclaim. Given the Holland brothers' success with the Kinetoscope, it is not surprising Edison granted them sole and exclusive Canadian rights to the new Vitascope. And, given their Ottawa origins and close business links with Ahearn and Soper of the Ottawa Electric Railway Company, no more surprising that they should choose to launch the Vitascope in Ottawa at a park carved out of land originally owned by them. The street that runs through what was once West End Park is now called Holland Avenue – though nothing marks it as the place the movies came to Canada.

Toronto

Several weeks later, during the Toronto Industrial Exhibition (later, the CNE), the movies arrived in Toronto. In fact, two competing devices opened almost simultaneously: Edison's Vitascope and Lumière's Cinématographe. (There were, of course, no standards for equipment or film stock; the several American, French and British machines that came onto the market in 1896 were all non-compatible.)

The Vitascope opened at Robinson's Musée, 81 Yonge Street, on August 31, 1896, presented by Ed Houghton, a touring showman like John C. Green. Robinson's was a multifaceted place of entertainment, incorporating a me-

nagerie on the roof, a curio shop on the second floor, the Wonderland in the basement and the Bijou Theatre on the main floor offering vaudeville. The movies were shown downstairs in the Wonderland as one of several attractions (including waxworks) the patron saw for his dime. As some measure of the movies' status it is curious to note that a demonstration of "Professor Roentgen's Great X-Rays" commanded a higher admission price (25¢) and enjoyed a more prominent location in the lobby of the Bijou Theatre. The Vitascope show continued for six weeks. During the week of September 19th, films were presented of "the cataract of Niagara Falls and the whirlpool rapids" – the first time Canadian scenery appeared on the movie screen but a foretaste of the deluge of Niagara Falls films and similar exploitations of Canadian scenery that flooded the screens in the ensuing decade.

The Lumière Cinématographe opened a day later, on September 1, as part of the grandstand show at the Toronto Industrial Exhibition. Responsible for the show was H.J. Hill, well known as a born showman who had introduced the grandstand show as manager of the Exhibition. He made a deal with Lumière's travelling agent, Félix Mesguich, for the showing of the Cinématographe not only at the Exhibition but throughout Ontario. When the Exhibition closed, he transferred the show to 96-98 Yonge Street (opposite Robinson's Musée) and later toured Ontario with great success.

(to be continued in Cinema Canada no. 30)

Note: The above is written in response to Gary Evans' "The First Films in Canada" (*Cinema Canada*, no. 26) which repeats, for the umpteenth time and without further research, two anecdotes about the first film shows in Canada. Both are wrong: Ernest Ouimet's in substance and John C. Green's in detail. A thorough search of French and English-language newspapers in Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto, plus a knowledge of when the various film devices were invented and marketed proves beyond a reasonable doubt that the Ottawa show on July 21 (*not* June), 1896 was the first in Canada. The presentation of this conclusion in *Dreamland* was based, not on Anglophones "favoring" John C. Green's story over that of Ernest Ouimet, nor indeed on recollected, anecdotal evidence at all, but on contemporary, documented evidence. **P.M.**

Note: In recollecting the event many years later, John C. Green not only aggrandized his own role but consistently put the date of the show one month earlier. There are other, minor, errors in his account: for example, it was a Vitascope not a Kinetoscope, Ahearn, not O'Hearn, and there were certainly other Vitascope in use in the USA in July 1896 than the one in New York.

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