

● On the U.S. circuit, summer 1908, as the countess Marie-Anne (in ticket booth) and son viscount Henry de Grandsaignes d'Hauterives (in hat) pose with unknown employees before the theatre they had rented in St. Louis, Missouri. Billboard features latest Pathé melodramas

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 thanks to the laziness of other researchers. Thousands of words have been written in homage to Lumière agent Félix Mesguich who amazed New Yorkers with the Lumière Cinématographe. Yet one day earlier, Mesguich's colleague,

naval officer Louis Minier,¹ and an assistant from St. Etienne named Louis Pupier,² 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 Anglophone historians still quote English-language newspapers that report the first Canadian screening one month later in Ottawa.³ In Montreal, the newspaper *La Presse*, holding its centenary this year, was the only newspaper that deemed the event worthy of front-page coverage.⁴ The other Francophone newspapers would by and large simply paraphrase *La Presse*.

But the odyssey of the Cinématographe did not end there. Minier and Pupier played at the Palace Theatre for two months, a phenomenal success for Montreal at the time.⁵ From there Minier and Pupier went to the Toronto Industrial Exposition,⁷ then returned for the one in Montreal,⁸ before touring the

main cities of Quebec.⁹ Louis Minier returned to France subsequently while his assistant continued touring with an aide named Jackson.¹⁰ Minier returned in the spring of 1897 with a new assistant, Faure.¹¹ In mid-summer they were joined by Félix Mesguich who had left the United States where the patent war unleashed by Edison rapidly put an end to the Lumière company's activities in that country. Before returning to France, Mesguich too played at the Palace,¹² followed by another Lumière agent, M. Prosper, who installed himself on the grounds of the Montreal Exposition and subsequently moved to the Palace.¹³ He too was coming from the U.S. on his way back to France.

All these Lumière agents, bustling about almost as much as the spectators generated by the Cinématographe's incredible popularity, came to Montreal to collect whatever remaining monies America could offer. Their films, *L'arroseur arrosé*, *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.¹⁴ While a few more sporadic tours were undertaken in 1900 and 1901 by a new agent, "Prof." F.J. Blanchard,¹⁵ the end of the Lumière era was nigh.

Already as of November 1897, the Cinématographe 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 *Historiographe*, and it was presented by two French citizens from Pont L'Abbé in Brittany: viscount Henry de Grandsaignes d'Hauterives and his mother, countess Marie-Anne, née Tréouret de Kerstrat.¹⁶ At age 56, she, a descendent of the revolutionary statesman Mirabeau,¹⁷ crossed the Atlantic to become the cashier of a travelling cinema. From 1897-1914, she took her son and his

apparatus across America in an attempt to rebuild the family fortune he had dilapidated. And she succeeded, bringing her show to the princes of the Church in Quebec, even to the governor-general of Canada.¹⁸ Yet she would return to France on the eve of the First World War, penniless, ruined by the American cinema monopoly, reduced to renting out rooms and selling Breton lace to tourists.

For nine years she and her son would make annual tours to Quebec, presenting several shows daily in theatres, schools and church basements; in cities, villages and the remote countryside. Like Charles Pathé who alone produced more films than the American producers combined,¹⁹ the Hauterives in their time showed more spectacles than all of their competitors. Often the first ever to screen films in the localities they reached,²⁰ they created a reputation and a public to whom they returned every year, always showing new "views" first bought from the Lumières, then Méliès, then Pathé. As of 1900, they showed mainly hand-tinted films that would further increase the Historiographie's appeal and popularity.²¹

Their impressive collection allowed them to change their program daily. (At the time, the films were very short with little diversity of theme; as a result the spectators had soon seen everything and the projectionist had to move on if he had no other pictures to show.) The Hauterives had all the French hits of the time: *Le voyage dans la lune*, *L'affaire Dreyfus*, *Jeanne d'Arc*, *Cendrillon*, *Histoire d'un crime*, *Épopée napoléonienne*, etc. The name Historiographie was likely used to highlight the "pedagogical" virtues of their program, which included a number of short historical subjects produced by the Lumières in 1897: the deaths of Marat, of Charles I, Napoleon and the Pope.²² Their program soon included Méliès' surreal films, but towards the end of their career was comprised mainly of Pathé melodramas. Their greatest success, however, was the Crucifixion which they presented on each tour, in new versions every year with a grandiloquent commentary by Henry that left the audience stunned. They soon earned the ire of the clergy who wanted to maintain their own monopoly on the monies earned from the Passion story.²³ Not only did the Historiographie Company profane the image of the Lord, but also His day and His income!

Without intending it, the Hauterives were the mentors of the first Québécois to enter the film industry. Their impresario, Guillaume Boivin, after the Hauterives' success at his Eden Museum in Montreal, regularly began to show films there.²⁴ He then went on to film sales and rentals, becoming the Edison agent in 1901.²⁵ As for Ernest Ouimet, Quebec's cinema pioneer, he first learned the business working as a stage electrician at the Sohmer Park in Montreal where until 1906 the Hauterives' autumn Sunday shows drew thousands of spectators.

Throughout the remainder of the year the Hauterives travelled through the U.S. presenting their shows before selected audiences in Atlantic City,²⁷ Boston, Bermuda,²⁸ at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis,²⁹ etc. Their tours were punctuated with trips back to France where Marie-Anne owned a large estate called Le Suler in the bay of Loctudy in Finistère where young Parisian painters would come to try their hands at the landscapes and costumes of Brittany.³⁰

In 1906 the Hauterives ceased their Quebec tours. In January the Ouimetoscope opened in Montreal and, in less than two years, transformed its owner into a movie mogul. Dozens of theatres opened throughout the province; Ouimet supplied them with projectors, films, commentators, even newsreels produced by himself.³¹ 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

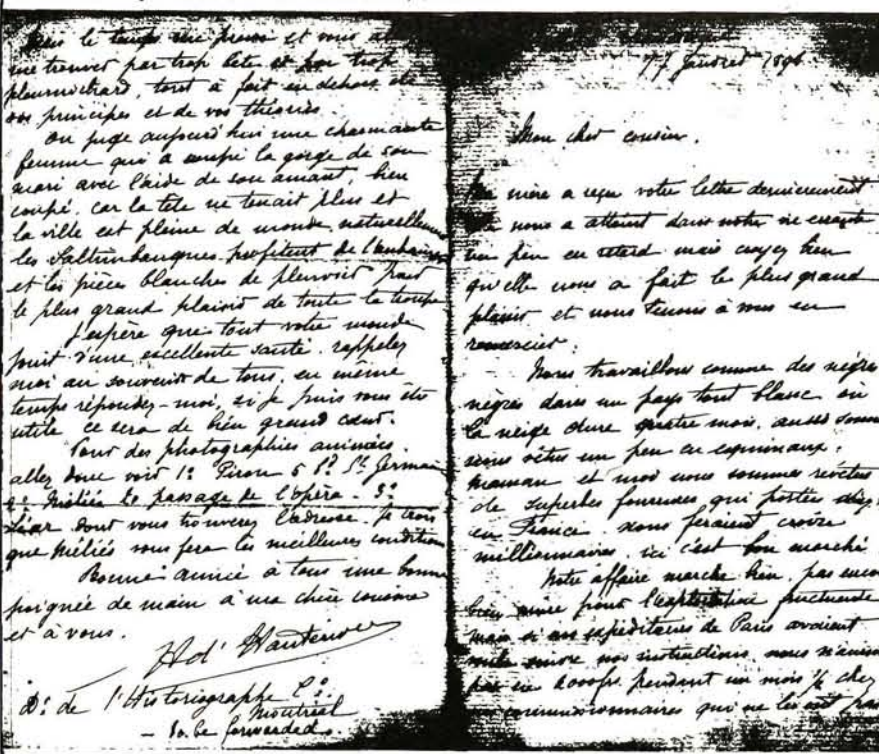
months at a time, specializing in "Parisian mimodramas."

For 10 years, the newspapers of French Canada had announced the arrival of the Hauterives' Historiographie and sung the praises of their rendition of the Passion. After their departure, nobody ever spoke of them again except for Ouimet in his often imprecise memoirs.³² 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'Abbé where she had retired after hav-

ing sold her villas. Local newspapers made no mention of her, even if they did list the film program at the Brittany Cinema.³³ 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 café on the rue de Mauberge, Sept. 26, 1929.³⁴ Aside from the overgrown tombstone in the Pont L'Abbé cemetery, they have neither monument nor commemorative plaque. Only this article, and perhaps a book if a publisher would see fit.

Neither the Hauterives nor the operators of the Cinematographe are yet part of the established record; forgotten too are their many spectators. And 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.

● The viscount writes to a French cousin about Quebec winters, and a crime of passion that would one day become the hit feature film, *Cordélia*



LE NORD

EMULSION
Pour Guérir les RHUMATISMES

WONNY
Selseperrille de BRISTOL

ELLE VOUS RETABLIRA
LA SALESFANELLE DE BRISTOL

A VENDRE
Hotel BEAULIEU
ST-JEROME

A VENDRE
Fonderie St-Jerome
M. I. VIAU & FILS

SALLE DU MARCHÉ - SAINT-JEROME

DEUX SOIRÉES D'HISTORIOGRAPHE

Soirées auspices de LA CIE DU THEATRE DE LA GALETTE

Dimanche et Lundi, 9 et 10 Juillet 1899 à 8 hrs.

M. le Vicomte H. d'HAUTERIVES, directeur

Le spectacle sera donné par l'OPERA MUNICIPAL de St-Jerome

PROGRAMME

1. La Mort de Jeanne d'Arc

2. Le Voyage dans la Lune

3. L'Affaire Dreyfus

4. L'Épopée Napoléonienne

5. Histoire d'un Crime

6. Jeanne d'Arc

7. Le Voyage dans la Lune

8. L'Affaire Dreyfus

9. L'Épopée Napoléonienne

10. Histoire d'un Crime

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Capital payé \$8,000,000

Fonds de réserve 2,600,000

G. HAGUE, GÉRANT GÉNÉRAL

T. F. FISHER, GÉRANT LOCAL

11, RUE ST-JACQUES, QUÉBEC

Notes

- 1/ *Le Courrier de St-Jean*, 12-3-1897.
- 2/ *Le Pionnier*, 4-12-1896.
- 3/ Peter Morris, *Embattled Shadows: A History of Canadian Cinema 1895-1939*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978. Despite this one truncated aspect of its research, Morris' book is the only serious Canadian work devoted to this period. For the debate among Anglophone historians, see Gary Evans, "The First Films in Canada," *Cinema Canada*, No. 26, March 1976, p. 17; Peter Morris, "The First Films in Canada: The True Story (I)," *Cinema Canada*, No. 29, pp. 18-19; "The Ottawa show on July 21... 1896 was the first in Canada."
- 4/ The other Montreal newspapers to comment the event are: *La Patrie*, *Le Monde*, *Le Soir*, *Les Nouvelles*, as well as the *St-Hyacinthe Courrier* for which the *La Presse* reporter freelanced.
- 5/ *La Presse*, 29-6-1896.
- 6/ *Les Nouvelles*, 16-8-1896.
- 7/ *Ibid.*
- 8/ *Ibid.*; also *Le Monde* (Montreal), 10-9-1896.
- 9/ Their passage can be traced through most of the local newspapers of the time, too numerous to reproduce here.
- 10/ *Le Pionnier*, 4-12-1896.
- 11/ *Le Courrier de St-Hyacinthe*, 15-4-1897.
- 12/ *La Patrie*, 16-6-1897.
- 13/ *La Presse*, 21-9-1897.
- 14/ *Lovell's Guide*, Montreal, 1898.
- 15/ *La Presse*, 12-01-1900.
- 16/ Alain Galorun, *État de la noblesse française subsistante*, Paris, 1984.
- 17/ Her mother was a Riquette de Mirabeau.
- 18/ *Ottawa Evening Citizen*, 4-3-1898.
- 19/ Georges Sadoul, *Histoire générale du cinéma*, Vol. II.
- 20/ *L'Avenir du Nord*, 3-12-1897.
- 21/ *L'Événement*, 25-7-1900.
- 22/ *L'Avenir du Nord*, 10-12-1897.
- 23/ Letter from the bishop of St. Hyacinthe, 15-7-1899.
- 24/ *La Patrie*, 21-1-1899.
- 25/ *Le Journal*, 14-12-1901, and throughout 1902.
- 26/ *La Presse*, 13-10-1934; *La Presse*, 10-10-1948 and 31-8-1967; *The Gazette*, 21-4-1962.
- 27/ *Le Soleil*, 22-9-1903.
- 28/ The Grandsaignes d'Hauterives correspondence in the author's possession.
- 29/ *Communiqué*, the 8th tour.
- 30/ Interviews with M. Cariou, Mme Cabelle, Locudy.
- 31/ *Embattled Shadows*, op. cit.
- 32/ In the book by Ouimet's nephew, *Les Ouimetoscopes*, Montreal, 1978, Leon Belanger records his uncle's claim to have assisted at a public projection by two Frenchmen whom he names August Guay and Andre Vermette. Ouimet adds that one of them became a professor at the Montreal Technical College. Ouimet's memory is only partially correct: Louis Minier did return to Quebec in 1898 and became a professor at Laval University's Montreal campus (see *Bevue des Deux Françaises*, June, 1898). Ouimet is also the only one on record to have spoken of the Hauterives, but he was unaware of their true importance.
- 33/ *Le Citoyen*, *Le Finistère*, December, 1920.
- 34/ *Le Petit Parisien*, 28-9-1929