

HISTORICAL NOTES by Peter Morris

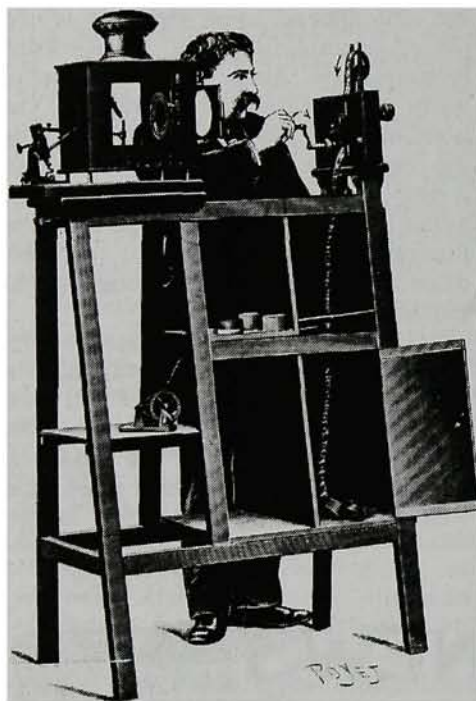
THE FIRST FILMS IN CANADA: THE TRUE STORY (2)

The following is a continuation of Mr. Morris' article begun in issue no. 29 of Cinema Canada.

Montreal

Given the substantial social impact of the movies over the past 80 years, it is perhaps a little surprising, in retrospect, to discover the newspaper editors did not greet the arrival of the movies with a furore of front-page headlines. Ottawans had to search the bottom of page seven to discover that first, anonymous, film review in July 1896. Toronto's newspapers buried their comments and reviews of the stage shows at Robinson's and the Exhibition. However, there was a sense of wonder at the new invention (albeit, only yet another marvel in a marvellous age) and audiences were reported to be "thrilled and delighted". In contrast, Montreal's French and English-language press hardly deigned to notice the new invention. Promoters, of course, touted their shows in paid advertisements but the newspapers eschewed comment and review, restricting themselves to simple, informative notes to the effect that "such and such a device was being shown at such a place". Perhaps the editors found movies vulgar and undignified, not a form of entertainment to be encouraged even by merely commenting on them. Or perhaps, more simply, they considered movies little more than a passing fad, already on the wane by the time they first appeared in Montreal. In any case, though Canada's largest urban centre was treated to almost every projection device on the market in the fall of 1896, they received bare passing mention by the Montreal press.

These devices included: the Kinetograph at the Theatre Royal the week of September 28 (the movies were the last act, the "chaser", in a



Cinématographe Lumière

vaudeville program); the Animatographe at 2223 St. Catherine Street on September 30 and the Theatroscope at 58 St. Laurent on November 19. Later, in December, the Phantoscope opened at the Théâtre Français.

Among the interested spectators at those first film exhibitions in Montreal was a 19-year-old electrician, Ernest Ouimet, who was later to play a key role in the development of film in Canada. (Not only through the Ouimetscope, but by producing such key films as *The Scorching Flame* and *Sauvons nos bébés*.) Many years later, Ouimet recalled his first view of the movies but unfortunately confused dates and machines involved in a manner difficult to resolve. On the evidence, it is possible the exhibit Ouimet described was the Theatroscope at 58 St. Laurent (near Vitré) but, if so, not likely that it was the Lumière Cinématographe since Lumière's agents were under strict instructions to ensure the inventor's name was associated with every showing. Ouimet also suggested he saw the exhibit in the spring of 1896 and that "by the end of September or the beginning of October" the show-

ings were stopped – as soon as the cold weather arrived. Ouimet also said the equipment was sold to Sohmer Park and that showings took place there in the summer of 1896. No films were shown, in fact, at Sohmer Park until May 24, 1897 when the park reopened and advertised "The Radioscope" film show.

It is impossible Ouimet saw a Lumière exhibit in the spring of 1896. Though the Lumière Cinématographe had been first presented in public in Paris on December 28, 1895 (some months before Robert Paul's British Animatographe was shown in London and the Vitascope in New York), no machines were available in North America until late June, 1896. It was not that Lumière did not want to tap the American market. It was because, first, few machines had been constructed (and these were used in Europe) and, second, because Lumière insisted that exhibits be organized by his own representatives, personally trained by him as cameramen and projectionists. Unlike Edison, Lumière did not sell outright the territorial rights to his combined cameras and projectors. All presentations were organized directly by Lumière's agents in conjunction with a local promoter-exhibitor. The financial arrangement usually involved payment of a flat fee plus a percentage of the admission price. Once projectionists were trained in a particular area, the agent moved on to another town.

Félix Mesguich was the agent Lumière sent to North America. He arrived in mid-June and the Cinématographe opened in New York on June 29, 1896. Subsequently, he sat around waiting for the arrival of more machines and, later, toured the eastern States. He visited several Canadian cities in the fall of 1896 before returning to the USA, stopping off on the way to photograph – inevitably – Niagara Falls.

In summary, it seems likely Ouimet saw a Lumière exhibit (probably among others?) but, after sixty years, confused the dates, machines and places involved. Unless – or until – there is new evidence, that conclusion is inevitable. □

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.