

Saunders not the first to bring silent movies to town

An Australian musician and shoemaker, Garnet Hornby Saunders, is credited with bringing silent movies to New Plymouth.

In fact he was at least the fifth to appear with this marvellous new invention, the biograph machine. While he may not have been the first he was the man that developed the industry in the town and became known as "New Plymouth's King of Theatre".

The world was a fast-moving exciting place in the late 19th century. There had been world explorations during the Victorian era and now, with colonies established throughout the new world, inventions were making inroads of their own.

After the gramophone had brought crowds together to hear man's voice and music emanating from a machine for the first time, came the marvellous moving pictures. The biograph followed the French-invented cinematograph, which came after Edison's kineoscope. It was a large noisy machine that was originally hand-cranked, later by smelly diesel, then eventually by electricity.

New Plymouth was experiencing moving pictures for the first time, brought to the town as part of a circuit by various owners of biograph machines, including the Arnet Variety and Picture Company and West's Pictures. People wanting to reserve seats could do so at the Collier Piano shop.

Throughout September to November in 1909 more silent movies at the Theatre Royal were brought there by Mr Henry Hayward. The movies were short and several would be played in one sitting.

"An excellent programme was presented in the Theatre Royal last night by Hayward's Pictures. The biograph machine was placed on the floor of the theatre instead of the dress circle, making the pictures steadier and adding to the comfort of the patrons of the dress circle" reported the paper in November.

Among those played that night were *Boy Scouts to the Rescue*, *Turtle Catching in Soubroza*, *Hunting the Berlin Jack-the-Ripper* and *A Pretty Housemaid*.

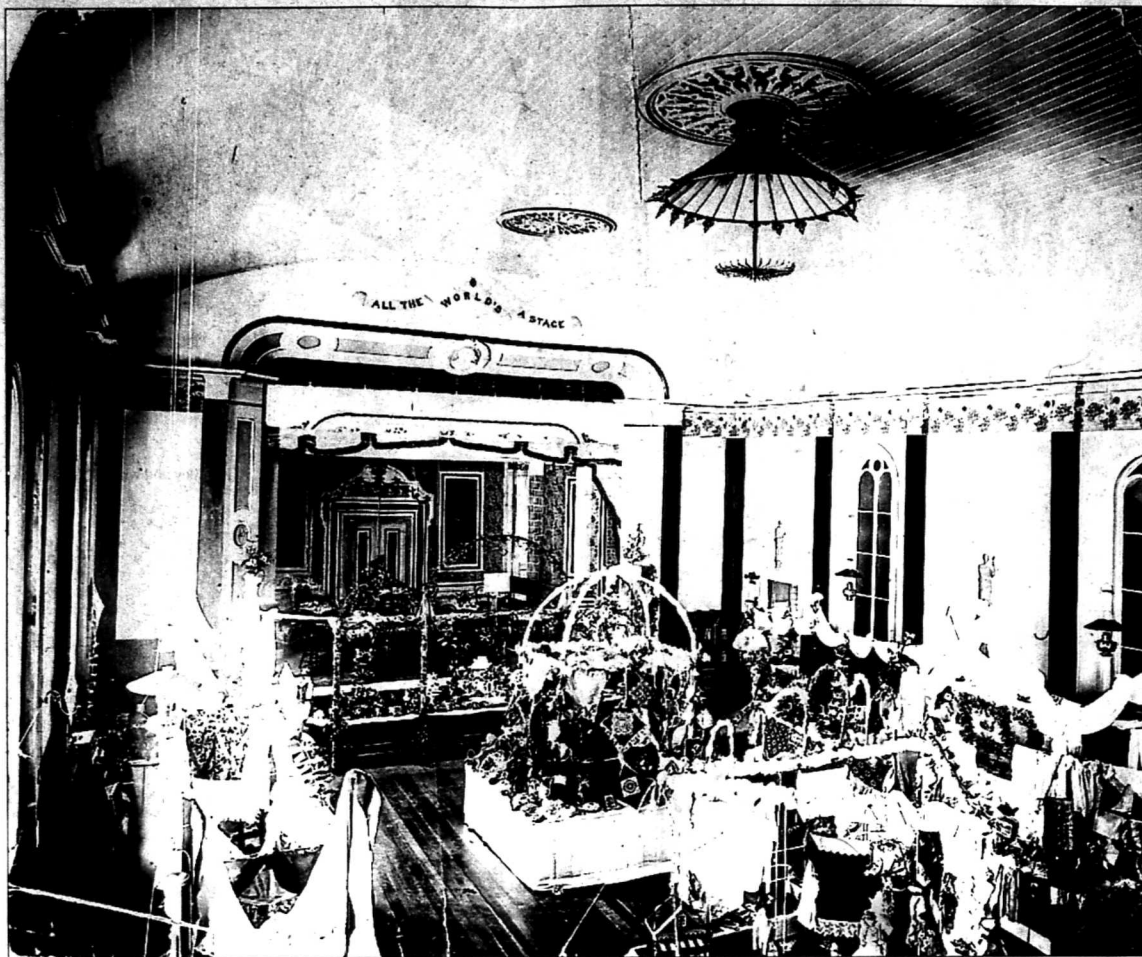
After his three-month contract at the Theatre Royal ran out Hayward established Friday night open air movies at Pukekura Park, then named the Recreation Grounds. While the pictures were silent, a live orchestra accompaniment added depth and drama to the scenes.

The same month Hayward left the Theatre Royal. Hewitt's Picture Propriety were booked with more than 8000 feet of films promised, "the longest and best programme ever shown in New Plymouth".

Upcoming titles from Continental and American firms included *M. Blierot's Great Flight Across the English Channel*, *Flower Girl of Paris* and *The Moth Hunter* with educational entertainment being the main focus of the season with scenic, comic, dramatic and industrial topics included.

After Hewitt came Australian shoemaker, musician and biograph machine owner, Saunders. His entertainment at the Theatre Royal was called the Saunders Biograph Pictures and he played the original version of *The Great Train Robbery* among many others.

He also provided other forms of entertainment including a boxing match and an endurance piano player, James Shubert Stirling, who played non-stop for 74 hours and 12 minutes, regaining his advertised world title. Saunders also took his machine to



Decked out: The interior of Alexandra Hall showing an 1890 craft show there. This building was later named the Theatre Royal.

Image: PUKE ARIKI PHO2012-0484

Inglewood, Waitara and Stratford and enjoyed great success. But his busy life wasn't without controversy.

As a young man, Saunders had joined the circus in Australia as a musician. He'd trained as a shoemaker, but at 21 became a part of the entertainment business. His talent as a cornet player is said to have led him to become Australia's champion soloist. He decided to move to New Zealand and in Waihi became the conductor of the Waihi Federal Band. But secure income in the form of a shoe repair business in New Plymouth led him to move to the town where he also became the conductor of the popular Garry's Band as well as playing in the Garrison's Band.

Saunders played his cornet at his picture shows, too, as well as having the orchestra accompanying the shows. Mrs George's Orchestra played at the Theatre Royal with Saunders' pictures, adapting their music to the tempo of the movie scenes for dramatic effect.

The Empire Theatre was Saunders' next regular venue for his movie showings and he is said to have been a familiar sight as he stood in the doorway of the Devon St building (which later became the Miller's Building and Martin's Toy Store). Here he could have regular shows without having to make way for theatre productions. During this time he married and raised a family, the three children growing up with the theatre lifestyle.



Show corner: On the left is the Alexandra Hall circa 1893-1895.

Image: PUKE ARIKI PHO2004-183

One of Saunders' passions was making his own films which he did with his projectionist, Brandon Haughton. The pair would drive around Taranaki in an open-top car filming scenes, events and people and show their productions each Saturday night in the Empire. These were a great success.

Saunders became managing director of Taranaki Amusements Limited which built theatres around the region, including the Everybody's Theatre in Queen St (which later became the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery). A publicly sour note came though when he tangled with the owner of the *Taranaki Herald* over a libel case.

In 1915, the Kinemacolor Company, a travelling biograph show previously a regular visitor to the town well

before Saunders arrived on the scene, wrote to the *Taranaki Herald* complaining through implication that Saunders had a monopoly in the industry when TAL supposedly wanted to charge an exorbitant amount for a lease at the Theatre Royal. It was also claimed that Saunders attempted to keep crowds away from the show. What followed was a slanging match via letters to the editor and then an attempt by Saunders to sue the owner of the paper, Henry Weston, for libel. Saunders lost and was ordered to pay costs.

Not long after, the Theatre Royal burned to the ground and even though it was covered by insurance, Saunders lost 400 seats in storage there for the nearly built Everybody's Theatre (the old Mayfair Theatre) across the road.

The opening of Everybody's was a great success and it was said to be the most beautiful theatre in the country. Saunders went on to lead a full life deeply involved in the community, including the building of the Opera House on the Theatre Royal's site.

Taranaki Amusements Ltd really were the only show in town until 1935 when Boon Bros built the State Theatre in Devon St East, the only theatre that hadn't once been home to silent movies.

Each form of entertainment meant a decline in another form. The success of the biograph machine was at a cost to the live theatre companies throughout the world. In Europe, where silent movies had been going for longer, fewer patrons attended live theatre in favour of going to the pictures and in Berlin, it was reported in 1913 that six theatre companies had gone bankrupt with several others on the verge of financial ruin, with the "extraordinary spread of the biograph craze" said to be responsible.

Biograph movies also took a hit when Stratford became the first town to have talking movies in the southern hemisphere. These were shown at King's Theatre in 1925.

■ References: *Taranaki Herald* Nov 30, 1909, pg4; Nov 27, 1909, pg1; Sept 1, 1909 pg1; *Hawera & Normanby Star* May 8, 1913, pg2; <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz>; J.S. Tullett, *The Industrious Heart: Saunders, Garnet Hornby*; <http://teara.govt.nz>; <http://en.wikipedia.org>; Taranaki places, Stratford; <http://teara.govt.nz>; Sorrel Hoskin, *Flickering Dreams* <http://pukeariki.com>

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