

The Element of Truth

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It is common knowledge to anyone who has ever spent time on a research project that dates are inconsistent in various accounts of any particular event. History has a way of sometimes being misconstrued through human error or bias. Often, historical events are recalled using presentism, “an orientation toward history emphasizing the current attitude on the interpretation of past events” (Teo, 1999). However, historians typically make “the commitment to understanding the past for its own sake”, which is termed historicism (Teo, 1999). It is my interest in this latter method of presenting history that has compelled me to thoroughly research the history of Picton’s Regent Theatre and its originator, George Cook.

From the beginning of this research project one year ago, I was given indication from a variety of people that the research I would be doing would be original and in high demand. This turned out to be only partially true (see Appendix A). Driven by a desire to see what else had been passed on to myself and others as “fact”, I decided to write about the biggest lesson learned through this independent study. I learned, truly absorbed first-hand, a crucial life lesson. History cannot always be taken at face value. The extensive history of the Regent Theatre did not happen exactly as it is said to have happened. I discovered this accidentally during my research; and it is my hope that by uncovering the truth, I will prevent future spokespeople for the Regent from discrediting either themselves or those associated with the theatre. The results are such that I will hereby dispel the myths that for so long have been devotedly believed by those interested in the Regent and the Cook family.

The history of the Regent has proven to be inaccurate on four specific points, some more significant than others. One date is that of the theatre’s final professional road show, another is the date of construction of the building that later became the Regent. A more substantial question was whether Mary Pickford had visited the theatre or not. The greatest concern of all was the merit of a major historical point: George Cook’s claim that he had been the owner of Canada’s second movie house. The lack of clarity surrounding these factors proved to be hurdles to my telling of the story. Now that they are settled, I am confident that my story is the accurate one.

The last professional road show at the Regent was reportedly performed by a duo, Mutt and Jeff, on August 2, 1929. They performed for one night only, as it turns out, on Wednesday, August 7, 1929. They were billed as “The big Laughing Success” and the “famous stars of the cartoon”, appearing on stage with “The Honeymoon” (Gazette Aug. 3 1929).

I was curious if they had actually been the Regent’s final professional visitors in those early years, or if the stock market crash in late October had any influence on Cook’s shows. My

investigation proved that The Arlie Marks Company, a stock company of twelve performers, was actually the Regent's final road show. The company featured a change of performance each night, and "good vaudeville between acts". Their first play was to be performed on Tuesday, October 14, and bore the name "What Price, Love?" (Gazette, Oct. 9 1929). The following night they featured "The Dumb-Bell", and again "vaudeville as you like it - peppy" (Gazette Oct. 12 1929).

Vaudeville was at its peak in the first quarter of this century and it attracted audiences 10:1 as compared to plays (Benson and Conolly 521). The combination allowed for a wide variety of tastes in the audience, since vaudeville, though still popular, was declining after 1925. 1929 was a point where the traveling road show was losing its favour with audiences, and by the following year, Cook would say in an interview, "There is no such thing as a road show today" (Gazette, Dec.29, 1930). Thus was the end of an era at the Regent Theatre, contrary to the supposed "history" as Pictoners know it.

A detail more important to establish was that of the date of construction of the building. An undisputed date, which is on a plaque outside the building, commemorates the site as historical for being erected in the 1830's. It had been called the Allan Block then, built by John H. Allan as a grain and feed depot. The dates surrounding Cook's involvement have typically not been disputed, simply recorded inaccurately by too many writers in recent past. The Restoration Project Report, commissioned by the Regent Theatre Foundation and completed by Philip Goldsmith & Company Ltd. Architects in 1994, offered the date 1920. The ASTRO Publicity Kit for 1999 suggested that the building was reconstructed as early as 1910. The actual dates of the building's major renovations, as they are found in the Picton Gazette for the corresponding years, are 1918, for the first conversion from warehouses into movie house; and 1922, when Cook transformed his theatre into a space that could double for live performances. This information is significant for future reference.

Enthusiasts on the Regent's history have chosen to believe that the Canadian-born American actress, Mary Pickford, once appeared on the Picton stage. On the evening of the opening gala for the Picton Summer Festival, held at the Regent in its inaugural season this summer (see Appendix B), artistic director Susan Cox was presented with a gift from the crew of her shows. It was a toilet seat mounted on a varnished wooden slab, with a brass plate that read, "Mary Pickford sat here". The cast and crew had been told that the film star, who was admittedly no stranger to the stage, had performed there with a vaudeville troupe in 1927. The presentation of this gag gift solidified another of the theatre's myths. The origin of the rumour is unclear, but evidence of its longevity is found in the article written by Ian Robertson for the County Magazine

in 1979, in which he states that Pickford “appeared at the Regent in 1927, as one of a score of famous vaudeville performers” (Robertson, 1979).

After perusal of the Picton Gazette microfilm for 1927, I found no mention of Mary Pickford appearing on the Regent’s stage, though she appeared on its silver screen regularly. In her autobiography, entitled “Sunshine and Shadow” (Pickford, 1955), she tells of her mother’s illness with cancer, which became acutely dangerous in 1927. “I gave up my work completely and moved out to my mother’s beach house. Douglas [Fairbanks, her husband at the time] went with me. There I remained for eighteen weeks” (Pickford 300). She stayed there until her mother passed away in March of the following year.

Before her flight to assist her mother, Pickford had been shooting a film called “My Best Girl”, costarring her future husband, Buddy Rogers. The film was completed in the fall of 1927 (Eyman 183). It seems unlikely that she would have had the time or the inclination at that point in her career to join a touring vaudeville troupe. 1927 was a busy year for Pickford, and nowhere in her memoirs or the biography written by Scott Eyman (1990) is there reference to a tour which might have brought her to the Regent, though many have been led to believe this was so.

Another long held belief is that George Cook, proprietor of several theatres from the year 1906 and onward, was the owner of the second movie house in Canada. This is a great claim, for the implications are that Cook belongs in the history books of Canadian film, and too in any other references to our young country’s cultural beginnings. The claim was made by Cook himself and has been subsequently referred to in many articles and news broadcasts. The credit was so significant that I was compelled to investigate its merit. If it was true, I would avidly adopt a mission to get Cook formally recognized for his achievement.

Precisely, the aforementioned claim is that George Cook owned Canada’s second movie house ever when he resided in Brockville in 1906. An excerpt from a 1938 issue of the Picton Gazette recounts the claim:

When Mr.Cook came to Brockville from Watertown, NY, he opened up the second picture show in Canada. The only other one was in Toronto, the Theatorium owned by John Griffin, an old circus man. At the time there were no pictures available in Canada and the film had to be brought from Chicago. Mr.Cook relates how he used to row across the St.Lawrence River when he was at Brockville and bring the one- and two- reel pictures over to this side, leaving a deposit for them if he could secure them. The third theatre in Canada was started by the Allen brothers in Brantford.

The tale of Cook rowing across the St. Lawrence to fetch movie reels is a plausible one. The river is narrow enough at Brockville that Cook might have successfully rowed across the river's breadth for such a purpose. And it is true that at the time Canada did not have any movie distribution companies (Morris 11). There were very few picture houses in 1906 in Canada.

With this fact in mind, the point about Cook owning the second movie house becomes more incredible, yet is continually repeated throughout the generations. In the Gazette issued March 21, 1962, it was written that Cook "opened Canada's second movie house in Brockville in 1905". If this had been true, Cook would have been the very first of his kind. Ian Robertson, reporter for the Toronto Star, wrote an article for The County Magazine in 1998, stating that Cook "and a partner opened what is considered Canada's second movie house, in Brockville" (Robertson, 1998). I have watched, mouth agape, as reporters for prominent Ontario newspapers and television stations have been told these "facts" about Cook or the Regent. Those of us who have blindly believed this substantial claim have likely done so in ignorance of Canada's moving picture show beginnings.

The moving pictures began as a business in Canada with traveling showmen. They all owned their own movie reels and a variety of Edison's Kinetoscope, with which they traveled from place to place (Morris 5 - 14). The first of these traveling showmen to settle was John Schuberg (Morris 19). Inspired by the world's first permanent movie theatre, established in April 1902 in Los Angeles, Schuberg decided to simulate the concept. In 1902, he opened Canada's first movie theatre, in Vancouver. He called it the Electric, after its American counterpart. Following that initial endeavor, Schuberg went on to establish several more movie houses in Canada's west from the years 1902 to 1906 (Morris 19 - 21). The Quebec city of Montreal received its first movie house in 1904, and St. John, New Brunswick, gained its own theatre in 1906. The concept was rapidly growing in popularity throughout the continent (Morris 21).

Yet, these theatres had uncomfortable seating and were lacking in ambiance, and "clearly betrayed their origins as former shops" (Morris 21). This sort of storefront theatre is likely the kind run by George Cook in Brockville. The likelihood of anything of a grander scale is improbable due to the lack of supporting evidence. Given the historical importance of Cook's claim, Brockville would probably guard with care their documentation on their own cultural landmark. However, there was no evidence to be found in Brockville. No advertising for picture shows was found in the Brockville Recorder (February - December 1906). Not any librarian or genealogist nor museum staff had ever heard of the theatre. There was no clipping about it in the museum's files.

Cook may have had his picture house in Brockville up to the year 1910. In the Regent website (<http://regent.interspeed.net>), Dave Taylor writes that, while Cook lived in Picton in 1909, he returned to live in Brockville before settling in Picton for good. The nameless movie house set up by Cook in Brockville, then, may have been in existence for up to four years. Yet no reference to any moving picture house was in the 1909 publication by the Brockville Board of Trade which documented the city's commercial, financial, and manufacturing activities (subtitled "An Epitome of Canadian Achievement"). And the local expert on Brockville's history, Douglas Grant, had never before heard of George Cook or Kukokus (as he was called in his native Greece), nor any picture house.

Cook and his unknown partner may well have maintained a temporary set-up for showing movies in Brockville, and this would explain why they did not place advertisements in the local paper. It may have generated profits modest enough to have caused them to advertise more cheaply, as with posters around town rather than in the Brockville Recorder. If it was not permanent, though, it does not earn much historical status in Canadian reference books.

There seemed to be two factors waiting to be determined which would either prove or disprove Cook's claim. The date of the establishment, and most importantly, whether or not it was "permanent". I requested the advice of Professor Peter Morris, professor of film at York University and author of Embattled Shadows, which is perhaps the most thorough published work on our country's film history. "[Permanent] is usually taken to mean it had permanent (i.e. fixed) seats and a proper lobby and box office. Renting an empty building and putting in seats probably wouldn't count however long it remained in the same place...It was common at the time to describe as permanent what were in fact storefront theatres with portable chairs." (E-mail transmission, June 29 1999).

Storefront theatres were the popular form in the early Nickelodeon Era. Before the more permanent establishments evolved in 1905, a common occurrence was that the audience would crowd into a rented storefront and watch a series of short silent "flickers" projected on a white sheet. The Nickelodeon Era was born with the theatre of the same name in Pittsburgh, in 1905. Though admission was only a nickel, the Pittsburgh Nickelodeon seemed to making a tidy profit.

This idea appealed to Toronto entrepreneur John C. Griffin, the first to create a nickelodeon for Canada. He returned home after visiting Pittsburgh, bought a small vacant store and converted it into "The Theatorium" (Morris 21). It was March 1906. In the fall of that year, the Allen brothers of Brantford went into partnership and opened their Theatorium (Morris 22). Both of these dates are as Cook said they were in his 1938 interview with the Picton Gazette. He

suggested that he was chronologically situated between them. No one I have spoken to has even a guess as to the date of Cook's opening in Brockville in 1906.

It is possible that George Cook's claim may yet be true. Though the assessment rolls for 1909 did not list a "G. Cook", the Genealogy department of the Brockville museum was missing files for the years surrounding 1906. The museum's holdings on theatres were meager. The Brockville assessment rolls for the years 1905 through 1910 have not been scoured. Nor have the business directories for that time. The other Brockville newspaper from the early 1900's, the Times, was unavailable at the Brockville Public Library for the year 1906. Or perhaps there were racist reasons why the achievements of a Greek immigrant might go unrecorded or under-appreciated.

To this juncture in time, however, enthusiasts of the history of the Regent Theatre and the history of its creator, George Cook, must admit to the lack of evidence on this matter. It is very unlikely that George Cook owned or operated a movie house which could in any way claim to be the second in Canada. There is truth instead in saying that he owned one of Ontario's first movie houses while he resided in Brockville.

History enthusiasts would be better to focus on Cook's magnificent achievements with his Regent Theatre. The Regent had the finest performance space in rural south-eastern Ontario, and was the best place for entertainment between Toronto and Montreal in its day. Its stage was comparable in size to that of Toronto's Royal Alexandra Theatre and it boasted a fly tower seventy feet high. George Cook was the recipient of one of eleven awards given out by Paramount Pictures to their best customers, commemorating their silver jubilee (Gazette Jan. 10, 1938). Cook's achievements need no embellishment. Whether the claim as an original film pioneer in Canada is true or false, George Cook was a steadfast member of the entertainment business of his fledgling province, and played a crucial role in his community.

Though entranced daily by the history I was learning about one of Ontario's best kept theatrical secrets, I was unwilling to believe stories that I suspected to be untrue. The Regent Theatre has fascinated me with its actual history. I am comfortable with the truth about Arlie's Stock Company, the date of the Regent's construction, the absence of Mary Pickford, and the admission that George Cook did not likely mark an historical site in Brockville in 1906. Seeking out the truth on these matters helped me learn a greater truth that I will take with me in all of my future research. History is written by people, and people have biases and flaws and laziness and many inhibiting traits when it comes to recording history accurately. History therefore cannot be taken as truth simply for the secondary account it often is in its written form.

Appendix A

In pursuing the background for these common-knowledge “facts” about Picton’s theatre and its owner, I observed a pattern present from the very beginning. The first indication was that I was misled about the simple prospect of researching the topic. I was told that the boxes in the attic were waiting to be investigated, though I could see last summer that they had been put into moderately organized piles. Only this summer did I find that they contained documents and photographs from the past twenty years or less, which held little relevance to my current fascination with the 1920’s. Last summer I found a mere paragraph in a book about Prince Edward County, which is the only formal writing published on the theatre. I was led to believe that it was the only information available on the Regent’s history. Much later I discovered two separate essays written by former Queen’s University students, as well as a few helpful articles published in local periodicals. These did assist me, but they showed that I was not the first to investigate the subject, as I presumed from the reactions of the people to whom I had spoken. Also, I was told by Picton librarians that they were “always” getting requests from tourists for literature on the theatre’s history. Since there was nothing to give them, I was more inspired than ever to write my history into a comprehensive booklet. I was sorry to witness, during my two months of working in the theatre box office, not a single direct request for such literature.

Appendix B

While movies continued to be shown into the 1970’s, the live theatre of the “flappers” era came to a halt at the Regent in 1929. In 1994, the Regent Theatre Foundation took over the theatre after purchasing it from Louise Cook, George’s daughter. At that point, amateur theatre and professional musicians again appeared on the Regent’s stage. It was just this past winter that renovations were done to a grand enough scale that the stage could be used to its full capacity by professionals. This was due to the coming of the Picton Summer Festival. The Festival, in its inaugural season this summer, features three shows that run in repertory until September 4, 1999. All of them capture the flashiness and pizzazz of the road shows of the twenties. In this degree, the Picton Summer Festival is the first time in seventy years that professional live theatre has been shown on the Regent stage. The opening gala was on the evening of June 26.

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