

# MOVIE DEBUT

## Films in the Twin Cities, 1894–1909

**T**he movies slipped rather unobtrusively into the Twin Cities late in 1894 when five Kinetoscopes arrived in Minneapolis. Inventor Thomas A. Edison's new machine showed pictures moving silently within a cabinet, into which viewers peered through a glass-covered peephole, one at a time. The modest flurry of publicity that accompanied these first showings did little to foreshadow the arrival of a major new player in the field of entertainment. But from those first displays of film-in-a-box grew an industry that witnessed rapid technological changes, a proliferation of modest and palatial theaters, the growth of a national system of film distribution, the work of great directors, a star system that nurtured performers known to legions of fans, and a new production center called Hollywood.

**Lucile M. Kane  
and John A. Dougherty**



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**Minneapolis's Palace Museum, Washington and First Avenue South, 1896, home of mechanical wonders, magic lantern shows, and vaudeville. The Palace introduced screened moving pictures to the Twin Cities on November 25, 1895.**

The 15-year span between 1894 and 1909 was a lengthy prologue to the establishment of motion pictures as a significant amusement in a scene already crowded with fairs, circuses, sports, music, drama, and other recreational activities. During this early era Minnesotans witnessed short films added to programs in legitimate and vaudeville theaters, the conversion of existing buildings into storefront theaters devoted almost entirely to showing movies, and the proliferation of movie exhibitors and distributors. The storefronts, the exhibitors who operated them, and the distributors who supplied the films formed the nucleus of the new movie business. By 1909 film exhibition was poised at the beginning of a boom that soon would make the new medium a popular, low-priced entertainment widely available from the downtown business districts into diverse neighborhoods throughout the Twin Cities.<sup>1</sup>

The press virtually ignored what probably was the Twin Cities' first film exhibition, held in Minneapolis at an unidentified location on Thanksgiving day, November 29, 1894. The publicity for a Kinetoscope exhibition at Seaver E. Olson's "Mammoth Department Store" in Minneapolis on December 3, however, revealed that Olson had arranged to have the earlier show transferred to his building as a special holiday attraction. "At an enormous expense we have concluded negotiations, with the EDISON KINETOSCOPE CO., under which we lease them space wherein they are to exhibit at POPULAR PRICES . . . Edison's Greatest Wonder," read the store's advertisement. The machines were probably furnished by Norman C. Raff and Frank R. Gammon of New York City's Kinetoscope Company, a partnership that in December 1894 had an agent in Minneapolis receiving films and other supplies.<sup>2</sup>

Kinetoscope exhibitions had begun in New York on April 14, 1894, and within a few weeks opened in Chicago and San Francisco. Throughout that year and the next, cities scattered from coast to coast showed films in "parlors," where



*Seaver E. Olson, whose department store hosted one of the Twin Cities' first Kinetoscope exhibitions*

Kinetoscopes often shared space with Edison's phonographs, and in stores, dime museums, arcades, and other venues. Unlike the phonograph, the films were silent and, for the most part, remained so until the late 1920s.<sup>3</sup>

Olson, a Norwegian immigrant who played a key role in founding the Minneapolis Industrial Exposition, with its exhibitions of machinery and mechanical processes, was credited by the local press with his "usual intrepid enterprise" in bringing the five Kinetoscopes to his store. The machines, on exhibition for a "limited period," were "in the shape of a handsome hardwood cabinet." Within each was "a mechanical device operated by Electricity that presents to view accurate

<sup>1</sup> On the national level, see Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), 417–18.

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<sup>2</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, Dec. 2, 1894, p. 4, 11. No connection has yet been found between the agent, H. A. Groesbeck, and this exhibition, but he received several shipments in late 1894; Invoice Book, vol. 1, p. 97, 99 (Dec. 6), p. 107 (Dec. 13), p. 119, 120, 121 (Dec. 18), p. 149 (Dec. 24), Raff and Gammon Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. On the Kinetoscope Company, which held distribution rights in the United States and Canada, see Musser, *Emergence of Cinema*, 81, 82.

<sup>3</sup> Musser, *Emergence of Cinema*, 81–82; Gordon Hendricks, *The Kinetoscope: America's First Commercially Successful Motion Picture Exhibitor* (New York: Beginnings of the American Film, 1966), 60–69; Garth Jowett, *Film, the Democratic Art* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1976), 190–91.

photographs of life scenes, acts by famous artists, actors, actresses and celebrities of every kind . . . in actual motion in their various specialties.” Viewers looked through “a small window covered with clear glass” located in the top of the cabinet. The photographs on the film passing swiftly before the eye caught even fine details, like pipe smoke drifting across a scene and slowly dispersing into the air. Each Kinetoscope showed a different film. Adults paid 15 cents to see the five films and children 10 cents—prices the store claimed were the lowest anywhere.<sup>4</sup>

The press also commended Mannheimer Bros. department store in St. Paul for its “usual enterprise” when it opened a month-long Kinetoscope exhibition on January 14, 1895. The store acquired five machines, films, tickets, and other supplies from H. D. Higbee of Chicago, an agent for Kinetoscopes who had bought them from Raff and Gammon. Tickets priced at 10 cents for adults and 5 for children admitted patrons to all of the films. Each 50-foot celluloid strip provided about a minute of viewing, and the films were changed each week. The photographs forming the moving picture passed before the eye at a rate of 46 per second, “thus making actions follow each other so rapidly that the eye gazes at apparently living beings.”<sup>5</sup>

Drawn, perhaps, by store advertisements and lists of films published weekly in the press, large numbers of people visited the machines located on the store’s balcony. During the first week, patrons saw “the gaiety girls dance, Annie Oakley shoot glass balls, a wrestling match between a man and a dog, Japanese girls dance and a boxing match take place before their eyes.” By the end of January, the Kinetoscope gallery was attracting “parties of ladies who are delighted with the views.”<sup>6</sup>

Since both stores were popular with shoppers, they provided lively venues for exhibitions.

J. George Smith’s candy and sweet shop in St. Paul, which announced its exhibition on January 6, 1895, was particularly attractive to young people. At the store, Alice Monfort Dunn recalled, patrons not only viewed “the living picture in motion,” but bought imported fruit, chose candy from piles on the counter, and ate homemade ice cream at marble-topped tables.<sup>7</sup>

A fancier of innovations long remembered in St. Paul for acquiring an early electric car and equipping his soda booths with telephones for placing orders, Smith boldly claimed that at his store “Edison’s Kinetoscopes and Phonographs have at last been combined, for the first time, anywhere.” By January 12, when he sent tickets to a prominent St. Paulite, his claim had become more modest. The exhibition, he wrote, was “the first in St. Paul of Edison’s latest and greatest invention, the KINETOSCOPE. These machines not only reproduce sight, but also sound.”<sup>8</sup>

According to a local newspaperman who described the venture in 1929, when “talkies” were rapidly replacing “the silents,” Smith introduced “sound movies” to the city by hooking up a Kinetoscope to a phonograph equipped with a head set—a practice known elsewhere at the time. The combination, which Smith advertised as “perfect human actions . . . accompanied by the real sounds of the scene,” proved disappointing. While a film showed a barber cutting hair, a band played “Pomp and Circumstance” and a barbershop quartet sang “Oh, the Bullfrog in the Pond.” In a recollection 34 years after his enthusiastic claim, Smith admitted, “It never occurred to me to synchronize the music and songs with the acting.”<sup>9</sup>

Motion pictures soon moved beyond department stores and sweet shops. Dime museums, popular in the Twin Cities since the 1880s, added peep-show film exhibitions to their programs of varied and bizarre amusements, including melo-

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<sup>4</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, Feb. 2, 1921, p. 1, Apr. 6, 1928, p. 19, 23; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Dec. 2, 1894, p. 4, 11. On the exposition, see Lucile M. Kane and Alan Ominsky, *Twin Cities: A Pictorial History of St. Paul and Minneapolis* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1983), 83.

<sup>5</sup> *St. Paul Globe*, Jan. 15, 1895, p. 2; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Jan. 15, 1895, p. 5, 8. The machines and supplies were shipped directly to Mannheimer Bros.; see Raff and Gammon, Invoice Book, vol. 1, p. 398 for accounts dated Jan. 8, 10, 14, and 16; p. 242 for Jan. 18, Harvard.

<sup>6</sup> *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Jan. 15, p. 5, Jan. 20, p. 12, Jan. 27, p. 10, 12—all 1895; *St. Paul Globe*, Jan. 15, 1895, p. 2, Feb. 3, 1895, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Jan. 6, 1895, p. 7; Alice M. Dunn, “A Kindly Community: People and Places in Old St. Paul,” p. 58, in James Taylor Dunn Family Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul.

<sup>8</sup> Hoff [Piercy J. Hoffstrom], “How Did They Get That Way?” *St. Paul Dispatch*, Nov. 1, 1929, p. 13; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Feb. 19, 1945, p. 10, Jan. 6, 1895, p. 7; J. George Smith to H. A. Castle, Jan. 12, 1895, in Henry A. Castle Papers, MHS. The typewritten item was probably a form letter individualized by the addition of Castle’s name.

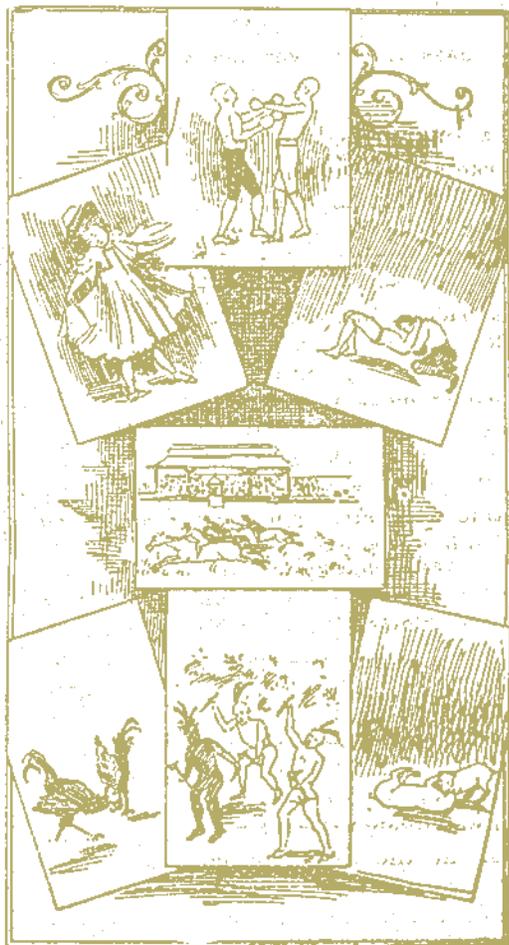
<sup>9</sup> *St. Paul Dispatch*, Nov. 1, 1929, p. 13; Hendricks, *Kinetoscope*, 119–21; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Jan. 6, 1895, p. 7. Edison’s Kinetophone, combining sight and sound and introduced in April 1895, did not achieve close synchronization either; Musser, *Emergence of Cinema*, 87–88.

KOHL & MIDDLETON'S  
**PALACE . . . MUSEUM**

Week Beginning Monday, November 25.

THE CROWNING WONDER OF THE AGE

**EDISON'S GREAT  
EIDOLOSCOPE.....**



This ingenious machine is the latest invention of the GREAT EDISON. It is a combination of the kinetoscope and the stereopticon. In illustrating a PRIZE FIGHT, for instance, it throws the images of the two pugilists up LIFE SIZE on a screen where they go through all the motions of

Advertisement for the Eidoloscope, incorrectly crediting Edison with inventing "the crowning wonder of the age"; *Minneapolis Tribune*, November 25, 1895.

drama, vaudeville, acrobats, clowns, a two-headed cow, and a four-legged girl. Recalling the St. Paul museums that fascinated youngsters, Alice Dunn also described "a series of fast-moving photographs [seen] by looking through a small aperture and turning a crank after inserting a nickel in a slot. These pictures were most amusing," she continued. "They depicted young women jumping up on chairs to escape tiny mice, ladies lifting their skirts above their ankles as they crossed muddy streets, little girls playing with dogs, and similar simple situations."<sup>10</sup>

Edison's "living photographs" were not long confined in cabinets. Kinetoscope sales began dwindling before little more than 900 of them had been distributed. At the same time, European and American inventors continued to develop motion-picture systems that included cameras, films, and projectors that flashed images on screens.<sup>11</sup>

To Edison's chagrin, Woodville Latham, a former chemistry professor, and his sons Otway and Gray introduced projected motion pictures to the public with their Eidoloscope exhibition in New York on April 21, 1895. First in the nation, the Eidoloscope also became first in the Twin Cities when it projected films at Minneapolis's Palace Museum on November 25 of the same year. The *Minneapolis Tribune* hailed its advantages: "Instead of looking into a tiny aperture and seeing small figures going through grotesque motions," it commented, "you sit comfortably in your seat and see the figures thrown up life size on an immense screen. . . . They dance, wrestle, engage in prize fights, and do all the other things men and women do. So complete is the deception that one can scarcely realize that these figures do not live but are mere shadows thrown up on the screen by the powerful aid of electricity."<sup>12</sup>

Several months passed before films were shown on a sustained basis, however. The event marking the change was a gala exhibition at the Bijou Opera House in Minneapolis on August 3, 1896, featuring English films projected by an English machine called the Animatograph. An audience of 200 invited guests enjoyed the pro-

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence J. Hill, "A History of Variety-Vaudeville in Minneapolis, Minnesota, from its Beginnings to 1900" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1979), 1:129-30, 171-72, 179-83, 218-19, 276, 296; Alice M. Dunn, "People and Places in Old St. Paul," *Minnesota History* 33 (Spring 1952):2-3.

<sup>11</sup> *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Jan. 16, 1895, p. 8; Musser, *Emergence of Cinema*, 86, 88-89, 91, 133; Hendricks, *Kinetoscope*, 9, 142.

<sup>12</sup> Musser, *Emergence of Cinema*, 91-100, 133-35; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Nov. 24, 1895, p. 25; *Minneapolis Journal*, Nov. 25, 1895, p. 2.

gram of “many beautiful and truly marvelous representations,” including *Persimmons Winning the Derby Race*. After this showing, motion pictures frequently appeared in the cities’ theaters as additions to “live” programs or as special features. At times films appeared before or after a play or even between acts.<sup>13</sup>

At the heart of this theater world where film exhibition began in earnest were four large opera houses: the Bijou in Minneapolis, the Grand in St. Paul, and a Metropolitan in each city. Minneapolis Theodore L. Hays managed both the Bijou and the Grand, and Louis N. Scott, a native of St. Paul, managed the two Metropolitans.<sup>14</sup>

Hays entered a business that later became his full-time occupation when he arranged this first exhibition. George D. Strong, a veteran performer with traveling shows, also began a new career when he operated the machine for Hays. “Dad” or “Daddy” Strong, as he was known, became an experienced projectionist after opening night. Although the films were longer than the strips used in the peep shows, he recalled, he “had to stop every few minutes, take one out and slip in a new one. We had no machines in those days to handle them; and I had to wind them up by hand. Seems like I still had a cramp in my right arm from coiling them up.”<sup>15</sup>

In 1896, after the opening, Strong recalled turning the projector crank “in a little old building next door to Sawyer’s saloon on Nicollet Avenue,” which may have been the Twin Cities first storefront movie house. He recalled that they “could squeeze 200 people at a time in that old place, but it was a continuous show—continuous from 10 o’clock in the morning until 10, 11 or 12 o’clock at night, just as long as they’d keep on coming.” From Minneapolis, Strong noted, the exhibition moved to St. Paul. “And when St. Paul had seen everything twice over, we started to make a tour



Manager Theodore L. Hays, 1895, shortly before he introduced motion pictures into Twin Cities legitimate theaters

of the country,” he continued. “And right there we struck a snag; the country people thought it was old stuff, magic lantern stuff; and they wouldn’t have much to do with us. So we had to come back.”<sup>16</sup>

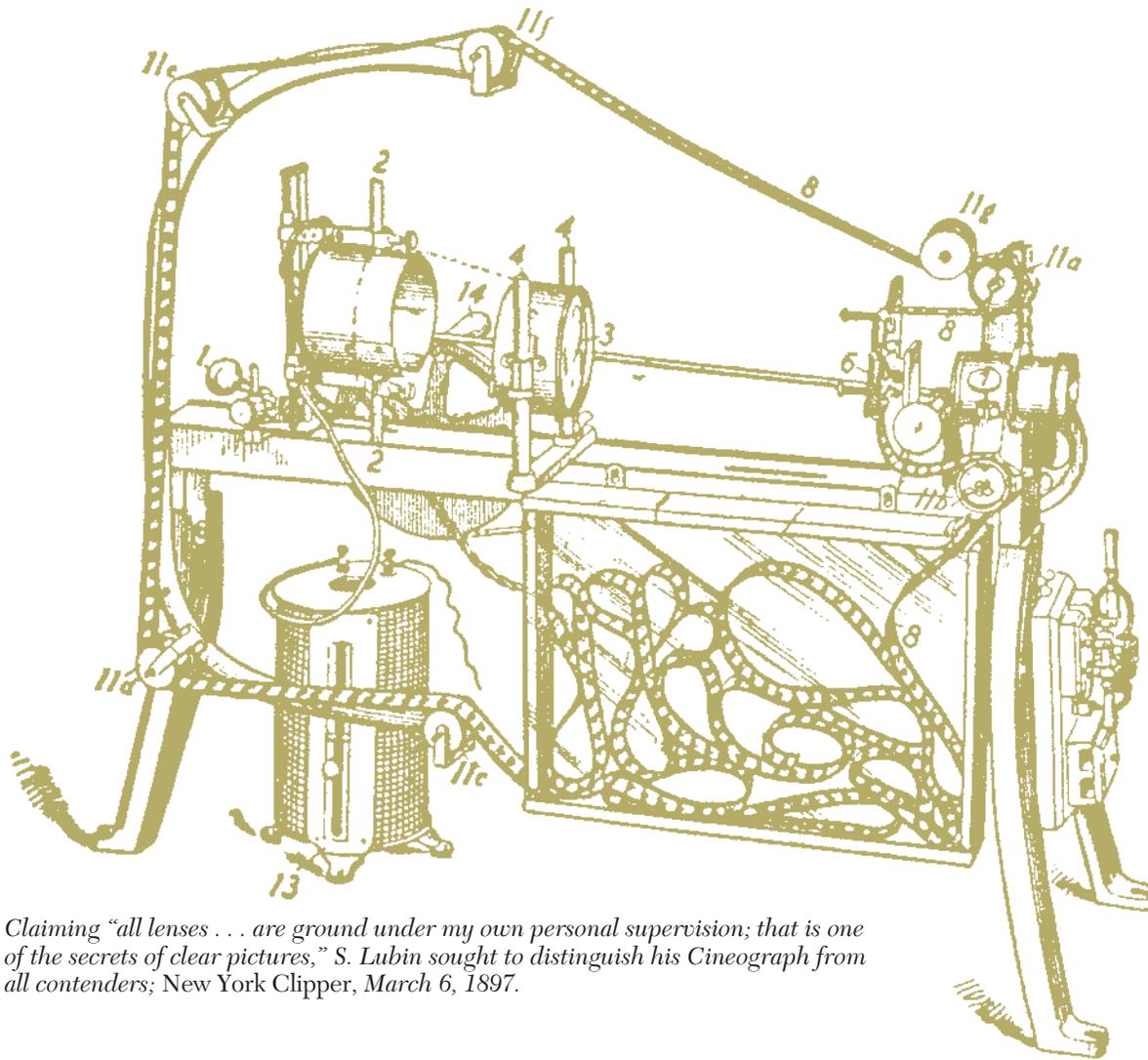
**B**eginning late in 1896, other projectors joined the Animatograph in the Twin Cities. Among the machines noted in the local press were the Biograph, Camera-graph, Cameraphone (a sound system), Cineograph, Kinematographe, Kinodrome, Polyscope,

<sup>13</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, Aug. 4, 1896, p. 5, May 21, 1922, 2d sec., p. 8. Advertisements and program notes in Twin Cities newspapers, 1895–1909, show how movies were added to theater programs; see photocopies in authors’ files. On positioning films after a play, see *St. Paul Globe*, Nov. 23, 1896, p. 4; for listings see, for example, *Globe*, Nov. 22, 1896, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, Aug. 4, 1896, p. 5. On Scott, see John M. Elzey, “Professional Legitimate Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota, from 1890 to 1918” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1972), 1: 41, 45, 48, 59; on Hays, see Paul S. Newman, “Theodore L. Hays, Theatrical Good Neighbor at the Turn of the Century,” *Minnesota History* 53 (Summer 1993): 239.

<sup>15</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, Aug. 4, 1896, p. 6; Newman, “Theodore L. Hays,” 239; *Moving Picture World* (New York) 35 (Jan. 12, 1918): 229; *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 21, 1922, 2d sec., p. 8, which does not mention opening night but claims that Strong “turned the crank of that machine before anyone else ever touched it.” On Animatograph exhibitions at the Bijou later in 1896, see clippings in Theodore L. Hays Papers, microfilm edition, roll 12, frames 661, 662.

<sup>16</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 21, 1922, 2d sec. p. 8. Sawyer’s saloon was at 314 1/2 Nicollet Ave.; *Minneapolis City Directory*, 1897. On the St. Paul showing, at 471 Wabasha St., see *St. Paul Dispatch*, Sept. 22, 1896, p. 5, which does not mention Strong or Hays.



Claiming “all lenses . . . are ground under my own personal supervision; that is one of the secrets of clear pictures,” S. Lubin sought to distinguish his Cineograph from all contenders; *New York Clipper*, March 6, 1897.

Projectoscope, Theatrograph, Veriscope, Vitascope, and Warograph. Local theaters coined their own polysyllabic words, like Gemograph, Lyceumscope, Windsorscope, and Milescope. Bold language in newspaper advertisements, program notes, and news items claimed an advantage for particular machines. For example, the *St. Paul Globe* pronounced Lumières’s Cinématographe superior to “every other type of mechanism of the kind” in projecting clear pictures. Carelessness with brand names was also a local practice, illustrated when the spokesman for the Palace Museum—threatened with legal action for falsely advertising that his program featured a Vitascope—seemed genuinely befuddled when trying to name the machine he was using.<sup>17</sup>

Such carelessness reflected the nationwide turmoil of a new business flooded with closely related inventions. As film historian Charles Musser points out, the idea of projecting motion pictures was “so simple and straightforward that it undoubtedly occurred to hundreds . . . of people who peered into the Kinetoscope.” In England, France, Germany, and the United States, various inventors acting independently and at about the same time produced machines that shared the same basic principles but bore different names. In this fertile ground, patent litigation and piracy flourished.<sup>18</sup>

While legitimate theater played an important role in motion-picture screening throughout this early period, the balance began shifting in the

<sup>17</sup> *St. Paul Globe*, Jan. 10, 1897, p. 16, misspelling the name of the projector; Edwin K. Fairchild, undated letter to James H. Warner copied into Warner to Vitascope Co., Dec. 29, 1896, in Incoming Letters, Raff and Gammon Collection. Projector names gleaned from advertisements and program notes in the local press; see Musser, *Emergence of Cinema*, 585, for an authoritative list.

<sup>18</sup> Musser, *Emergence of Cinema*, 91, 159, 164, 167, 236–40.



*St. Paul's Crystal Theater, about 1910*

## Moving-Picture Theaters, 1909

### MINNEAPOLIS

Crystal, 305–307 Hennepin Ave.

Dreamland, 307, 317–319 Plymouth Ave.

Gem Family Theater, 212 Hennepin Ave.\*

Isis, 30 6th St. S.\*

Lyndale, 624 20th Ave. N.

Majestic Family Theater, 1326 Washington Ave. S.

Milo, 626 Hennepin Ave.

Novelty, 38 Washington Ave. S.

Scenic, 253 Hennepin Ave.

Wonderland, 27 Washington Ave. S.

### ST. PAUL

Crystal, 444–446 Wabasha St.

Gem Family Theater, 18 7th St. E.

Lyceum, 966 Payne Ave.

Lyric, 147–149 7th St. E.

Unique, 163–165 7th St. E.

The People's Theater, 2100 Washington Ave. N., Minneapolis, opened in 1909. Lacking satisfactory proof that it showed motion pictures this early, it is not included here.

\*Identified as a vaudeville house when it opened in 1906, the Gem later ran "some vaudeville with the pictures." The Isis also had a dual identification as a moving-picture and vaudeville theater. See *Minneapolis Journal*, Dec. 1, 1906, p. 6, Apr. 28, 1909, p. 10, Oct. 10, 1909, drama and social sec., p. 2.

Twin Cities and the rest of the country toward shows in vaudeville houses. Originating during the midnineteenth century as variety entertainment in music halls where mostly male audiences enjoyed dancing, singing, and drinking, vaudeville was a flexible form that could include films at various points on the program. Around 1900, some of the "saloon theaters," under fire for immorality, changed their emphasis, and new theaters were also built. In the Twin Cities these new houses, offering "refined" or "high class" vaudeville, encouraged attendance by women, children, and patrons of the legitimate theaters. In Minneapolis, for example, the lavishly decorated Miles opened in 1908. Seating 1,400, the theater provided an ambiance that prepared audiences for the movie palaces of the future.<sup>19</sup>

An account by the *St. Paul Globe* of two motion pictures exhibited with a vaudeville bill at the Star (St. Paul) in 1903 conveys a sense of the early films.

The first, "The Chase of a Burglar," shows a burglar entering a window. A boy notifies the police and two 'cops' give chase. The burglar is pursued to a roof where he throws one of the policemen to the ground. The ambulance is called and the injured one is taken away while the other still pursues the villain. Down a steep hill they go, over streams to a railway station where the burglar jumps aboard a train and the policeman follows. At the next station the burglar alights and a terrific encounter follows in which the policeman wins. The other picture, "The Fireman's Dream," illustrative of the fire-fighter's duties, is very thrilling and called forth deafening applause.<sup>20</sup>

Dime museums, amusement parks, and other sites offering diverse entertainment also continued to exhibit films. The Windsor Novelty Theater and Amusement Arcade may have offered the ultimate in variety. Operating from

<sup>19</sup> *St. Paul Globe*, Feb. 2, 1897, p. 4, and Lawrence J. Hill, "Dives and Diversions: The Variety Theaters of Early Minneapolis," *Hennepin County History* 46 (Fall 1987): 4–10; Robert C. Allen, "Vaudeville and Film 1895–1915: A Study in Media Interaction" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1977), 23–28, 46–47; Hill, "History of Variety-Vaudeville," 1: 239–43, 306; *Minneapolis Journal*, Dec. 6, 1908, pt. 7, p. 8. On the trend toward both vaudeville and moving pictures, see Audley M. Grossman, "The Professional Legitimate Theater in Minneapolis from 1890 to 1910" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1957), 1:190–91; Elzey, "Theatre in St. Paul," 1:93–94.

<sup>20</sup> *St. Paul Globe*, Nov. 2, 1903, p. 4.

1906 until 1908 in St. Paul's recently vacated Windsor Hotel, it aimed to be "a sort of a winter fair or midway, the general admission entitling the patron to a choice of a number of different amusements and diversions, at nominal expense." Ten cents admitted viewers to a 400-seat vaudeville theater and a penny arcade including "vitascope, mutoscopes, and . . . every kind of scope which could possibly entice a penny." Five-cent movies were projected in the former billiard room, "one reel per show of the best pictures obtainable at the time—mostly western thrillers or apple pie comedies."<sup>21</sup>

The era when film exhibition depended on sharing the stage with other attractions had passed by the time the Windsor closed to make way for a new hotel. Between 1906 and 1909, twenty storefront movie theaters opened in the cities. Sometimes known as electric theaters but more commonly as moving-picture houses, these were neither as splendid as the new vaudeville palaces nor as tawdry as the earlier saloon theaters. With adult admissions generally set at 10 cents, they were not called nickelodeons, a term common elsewhere. The *Minneapolis Tribune* perceived these newcomers as "a mosquito fleet . . . where the straggler can witness a humble, but interesting form of entertainment, at most any hour of the day after the hour of noon." The article's suggestion that the theaters were insignificant was close to the mark: 6 of the 20 closed within three years. Crowded into the downtown business districts for the most part, they must have seemed small and plain in contrast to top-line legitimate and vaudeville theaters. Yet by 1909 the storefronts had made an impressive showing on the roster of Twin Cities theaters—15 out of a total of 32.<sup>22</sup>

Audiences in the new moving-picture theaters experienced a variety of settings. For "rearranging

[a] store bldg. into moving-picture show," as one building permit put it, proprietors might spend as little as \$200 for simple alterations or as much as \$4,000 to build fire-proof projection booths, change the store front itself, and partition off a box office.<sup>23</sup>

Although the press described two storefronts as "pretty," the Crystal (Minneapolis) was outstanding. A plan rendered by Harry G. Carter, a veteran theater architect, called for the conversion of a two-story brick-veneer structure into a theater with a seating capacity of 575 at a cost of \$20,000. According to the *Minneapolis Journal*, the theater, which opened on August 28, 1909, measured 115 by 44 feet and was 29 feet high without a gallery or balcony. The interior colors were red, green, and gold. The ornate façade facing on Hennepin Avenue was decorated in white and gold.<sup>24</sup>

The Wonderland and the Gem, located in an old district of Minneapolis frequented by transient workers, drew mainly male audiences even though the Gem was advertised as a "family theater." Other movie houses more actively encouraged the attendance of women and children. The Lyric (St. Paul), for example, periodically offered ladies "a handsome souvenir and a ticket that will entitle her to a chance on one dozen hand-colored Japanese cups and saucers." The Scenic, not far from the Wonderland and Gem, advertised "High Class Entertainment for Ladies, Gentlemen and Children" and distributed coupons granting free admission to any woman or child on a specified Wednesday afternoon. And the Crystal promoted itself as a "shoppers' theater," offering matinee programs of films with a heavy accent on fashions.<sup>25</sup>

Experiences of some early moviegoers remained vivid in their memories. A St. Paulite recalled that during his boyhood "many a

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<sup>21</sup> *St. Paul Dispatch*, Sept. 29, 1906, sec. 3, p. 11; *St. Paul Daily News*, Apr. 16, 1922, civic life/juvenile sec. p. 5; *New York Clipper* 56 (Aug. 1, 1908): 661.

<sup>22</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, Dec. 1, 1907, p. 25; authors' compilation of theater names, locations, and duration; Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907–1915* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), 4, 6, 8. According to Bowser, most nickelodeons charged a 10-cent admission; for local prices, see, for example, *Minneapolis Tribune*, Oct. 24, 1909, p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> Isis, Minneapolis, Permit No. A10322, Oct. 30, 1908, Office of the Inspector of Buildings, Public Health Center, Minneapolis. Figures based on authors' study of 11 building permits for Minneapolis theaters and 3 for St. Paul; also, James Sazevich, "Buildings Converted for Moving Picture Houses in St. Paul," a study prepared for the authors. Estimated costs for 8 ranged from \$200 to \$850; for the others, \$1,000 to \$4,000.

<sup>24</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, Jan. 24, 1909, pt. 7, p. 2; *Minneapolis Journal*, Apr. 28, 1909, p. 10, Aug. 16, 1909, p. 12. The combined cost estimate under permits A10513 (May 11, 1909) and A10606 (July 16, 1909), for structural alterations only, was \$3,500.

<sup>25</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, Oct. 22, 1911, pt. 7, p. 11; *Minnesota Union Advocate*, Oct. 11, 1907, p. 8; *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 22, 1906, p. 23, Oct. 21, 1906, p. 27, Oct. 31, 1909, p. 26.

Saturday afternoon was spent at the Crystal, where my brother and I sat watching the villain pursue the maiden or the good guys chase the bad guys, while the piano player thumped out the tempo and we chewed taffy in time with the action.” Another St. Paulite remembered realistic sound effects at the Unique, when bricks were thrown behind the curtain to accompany a brick-throwing scene in the film.<sup>26</sup>

F. H. Richardson, who included admonitions to projectionists in his popular *Motion Picture Handbook* published in 1910, later recalled how an incompetent operator marred his first experience in seeing a film. “The pictures ‘moved’ all right,” he commented, “Once, I recollect, they performed a wild gyration and landed fully half

way off the improvised screen, due, I presume, to the man in charge of projection having bumped into the lightweight unanchored projector with too much violence. The pictures flickered, jiggled and danced their way through . . . about 350 feet of film.”<sup>27</sup>

Another veteran, writing about experiences in Grand Forks, recalled the trials of early operators who were booed by the audience while repairing broken film with “wire, gum, glue, paste or whatever was handy.” Troublemakers sometimes invaded projection areas not protected by booths. “A railing was intended to keep out intruders, but the operator had to be on his toes at all times lest some prankster give the crank a quick turn or meddle with the film,” the old-timer remem-

<sup>26</sup> Bill Diehl, “Look ‘n’ Listen,” *St. Paul Dispatch*, Feb. 17, 1964, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> F. H. Richardson, “Projection Advance, A Little Chat About the OLD and THE NEW,” *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World* 91 (Apr. 28, 1928): 15.



*Front elevation of Minneapolis's fancy new Crystal Theater, which promised to show films "of foreign manufacture"; Minneapolis Journal, August 16, 1909.*

bered. “Youngsters would take delight in harrasing [sic] the projectionist by hanging a cap over the light, causing a black-out on the screen.”<sup>28</sup>

**B**y the time Twin Citians were viewing motion pictures in storefronts, the thousands of such theaters in the nation had created an unprecedented demand for films. In response, Edison, Biograph, and other companies operating before the turn of the century expanded their businesses, and new firms, most notably Kalem Film and Essanay Film Manufacturing, entered the field of competition. By the end of the industry’s pioneer era in 1909, New York was the leading film-production center, with Chicago a close second and many other cities, notably Philadelphia, in the running. Also in 1909, a migration began to Los Angeles—attractive for landscapes and sunshine—and there, a few years later, the suburb of Hollywood became the industry’s new home. Subjects expanded far beyond those of the brief films made for peep shows and early theater screenings, and a group of important directors, chief among them Edwin S. Porter, emerged.<sup>29</sup>

Porter’s most influential and popular film was *The Great Train Robbery*, a “story film” produced in 1903 and based on Scott Marble’s 1896 play of the same name. Hailed by a local reviewer as “far above any other triumphs credited to the perfectors of the continuous motion machine,” the 302-foot-long film told a sustained story and also helped introduce the Western as an enduring theme in American cinema. To satisfy what film historian Garth Jowett called “the insatiable public demand for films,” many of the new features used familiar stories drawn from novels and plays, such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Ben Hur*, *Evangeline*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.<sup>30</sup>

Although many films longer than the approximately 50-foot strips used in early machines were produced before story films became popular, the new tendency was toward relatively long features. “In 1909,” film historian Eileen Bowser states, “a feature film was 1,000 feet long or a little less, running from fifteen to twenty minutes at its



<sup>28</sup> *Greater Amusements and International Projectionist* (New York), Apr. 1966, p. 25.

<sup>29</sup> Jowett, *Film*, 30–33, 42–43; Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, 23–25, 149–50; *New York Clipper* 56 (Feb. 13, 1909): 1309; Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film, A Critical History, With an Essay[,] Experimental Cinema in America 1921–1947* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1968), 59.

<sup>30</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, Jan. 8, 1905, p. 26; Jowett, *Film*, 43–44; Musser, *Emergence of Cinema*, 352–55.



*Minneapolis's Gem Theatre, a modest storefront at 212 Hennepin Avenue, as it looked in 1915*

slowest speed." In the same year, multireel releases began.<sup>31</sup>

Films dealing with popular subjects, notably prize fights, the Passion Play of Oberammergau, the Spanish-American War, the San Francisco earthquake, and travelogues, also appeared in the Twin Cities as full-length programs. Since prize fights had been banned by state law in 1892, fight films, even those simulated for the camera, probably had a special attraction for viewers already interested in the popular sport.<sup>32</sup>

Legitimate and vaudeville theaters often exhibited the feature films as matinee or special evening attractions rather than as parts of longer programs. For example, the Metropolitan (Minneapolis) in 1900 offered Biograph's two-and-a-half-hour film of the Jeffries-Sharkey fight at Wednesday and Saturday matinees, and the Metropolitan (St. Paul) presented "Frisco Earthquake and Fire Moving Pictures" during a four-day week of matinees in 1906. A spring and summer season of films and vaudeville at the Grand (St. Paul) and the Bijou (Minneapolis) in 1909 illustrates another way the legitimate theaters used the new entertainments.<sup>33</sup>

Complex relationships connecting legitimate drama, vaudeville, and moving pictures developed as storefronts became popular. Competition certainly existed, and legitimate drama was the loser early in the new century during the rapid expansion of popularly priced entertainment. According to historian Audley M. Grossman, vaudeville and moving pictures "were obviously providing amusements for some people who had previously attended the drama as well as those who had never been inside a theater." High-class vaudeville in handsome theaters was in a favorable position. Its lowest prices often overlapped with the 10-cent admission of storefronts, and its highest fees merely approximated the lowest-priced tickets to legitimate drama. Its audiences must have far outstripped those of the fledgling storefronts.<sup>34</sup>

In this milieu, an intertwining of the two forms began. Vaudeville houses continued to exhibit films; storefronts began adding live entertainment to their programs. Imitating standard practice in vaudeville theaters, they regularly included songs or music illustrated by picture slides projected on screens. At the Isis (Minneapolis), the emphasis on live entertainment was so strong that the theater was once identified as a combination vaudeville and motion-picture house. On the other hand, the Gem (Minneapolis), originally a vaudeville house with a strong film component, became primarily a motion-picture house running "some vaudeville."<sup>35</sup>

The burgeoning population of Twin Cities film exhibitors illustrated the drawing power of the new business. Describing the national trend, a writer in *Moving Picture World* compared it to the California gold rush. "Everyone was hastening to 'stake a claim,'" he wrote. "The butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker, all . . . eager to gather a share of the riches, which seemingly awaited anyone who could rent a vacant store, hire three or four dozen chairs from the nearest undertaker and arrange for a projection machine and a supply of film."<sup>36</sup>

Despite a decade of experience with film exhibitions, few men identified with legitimate or vaudeville theater joined the ranks of the Twin Cities' storefront owners, lessors, and managers. Most of them migrated from other occupations or took on the new venture while conducting other businesses. Their backgrounds were as varied as jeweler, tea and coffee merchant, circus and vaudeville performer, penny-parlor operator, and slot-machine vendor. Among the exhibitors were at least two women: Sophie C. Qualey, proprietor of the Lyric (St. Paul), and Clara Frerck, associated with the Crystal (Minneapolis). While some 30 exhibitors entered the business between 1906 and 1909, about half of them left within a year or two. Those remaining formed the nucleus of a group

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<sup>31</sup> Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, 191, 195. On the widely varying film lengths, see the advertisement for Edison films in *New York Clipper* 52 (June 4, 1904): 342; Kemp R. Niver, *Early Motion Pictures: The Paper Print Collection in the Library of Congress* (Washington, D. C.: Library of Congress, 1985).

<sup>32</sup> Musser, *Emergence of Cinema*, 193–224, 240–49, 447; George A. Barton, *My Lifetime in Sports* (Minneapolis: Olympic Press, 1957), 48; *Minneapolis Journal*, Nov. 23, 1895, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, Mar. 18, 1900, pt. 1, p. 7; *St. Paul Dispatch*, May 19, 1906, sec. 3, p. 10, May 1, 1909, sec. 3, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Grossman, "Theater in Minneapolis," 1: 190, 192, 194; Elzey, "Theatre in St. Paul," 1:94, 114, 252. On the national boom in mass entertainment, see Allen, "Vaudeville and Film," 202–206, 310–11.

<sup>35</sup> Peg Meier, "Song Slides," *Star Tribune Magazine*, Apr. 4, 1993, p. 12–13, 15, 17; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 4, 1909, sec. 5, p. 1, Aug. 8, 1909, sec. 1, p. 4; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Dec. 27, 1908, p. 21, Jan. 24, 1909, magazine sec., p. 2, Oct. 10, 1909, 2nd news sec., p. 24; *Minneapolis Journal*, Dec. 1, 1906, p. 6, Apr. 28, 1909, p. 10. On combination programs nationally, see Allen, "Vaudeville and Film," 6.

<sup>36</sup> Merritt Crawford, "The March of the Years," *Moving Picture World* 85 (Mar. 26, 1927):283.



St. Paul's Lyric on East Seventh Street, the city's theater district, about 1909

that developed a distinct identity within the theater world.<sup>37</sup>

A tendency toward local management of local theaters—St. Paulites in St. Paul and Minneapolitans in Minneapolis—was strong in the storefront years. Later, when the number of theaters increased and circuits or chains appeared, such factors became less clear. Even so, recognition was given to the importance of local management.<sup>38</sup>

**F**rom the beginning, film distribution lacked this kind of local orientation. Initially, Edison and others provided the equipment and the films. Local exhibitors also acquired films from dealers in Chicago, from traveling agents, and perhaps from catalogs and lists

in trade journals. In 1908–09, at the end of the pioneer era, Charles E. Van Duzee, a Minneapolis dealer in stereopticons and calcium theater lights, added a film service to his business.<sup>39</sup>

More significant than this venture, the Twin Cities entered a type of distribution system evolving nationally when two firms headquartered elsewhere opened branch offices, called exchanges, in Minneapolis. The Mullin Film Service of Syracuse, New York, had agencies in Watertown (New York), Kansas City, and Scranton as well as Minneapolis. Even more important for the Twin Cities' future, Carl Laemmle, a Jewish immigrant whose distribution business was based in Chicago, opened a branch in Minneapolis in 1908. From this nucleus grew a flourishing trade that soon

<sup>37</sup> Harry H. Green, jeweler, *Minneapolis Journal*, Apr. 28, 1909, p. 10; Frank Seifert, merchant, *St. Paul Dispatch*, Aug. 28, 1937, p. 3; William J. Nevecker, performer, *Minneapolis Tribune*, Jan. 21, 1939, p. 3; Daniel J. LaBar, slot-machine vendor, *Minneapolis City Directory*, 1903; James Gilosky, penny-parlor operator, *St. Paul City Directory*, 1904–09. See also authors' ongoing research file, "Personal Names Linked to Theater Names," compiled from license authorizations published in the *Proceedings* of the Minneapolis and St. Paul city councils and city directories.

<sup>38</sup> "Personal Names Linked to Theater Names," supplemented by residential addresses from city directories.

<sup>39</sup> *Moving Picture World* 5 (Oct. 23, 1909): 587; *New York Clipper* 52 (Aug. 27, 1904): 613, and 54 (Mar. 3, 1906): 72; *Minneapolis Chronicle*, Apr. 20, 1907, p. 5. On Van Duzee's businesses, see Minneapolis city directories, 1897–1909. Reference has been found to two other local distributors: Northwest Film Exchange (1908), and the Great Northern Film Company; *Minneapolis Journal*, Aug. 28, 1909, p. 7.

would make the city a key point for distributing film in the regional market.<sup>40</sup>

It was not surprising that most of the area's distribution firms were located in Minneapolis. By the time that theaters in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota had created a significant market for films, the Twin Cities had long been the region's dominant urban center and Minneapolis the dominant twin.<sup>41</sup>

To head his Minneapolis exchange, Laemmle chose James V. Bryson, eventually known as "dean of Minneapolis film distributors." He later recalled his experiences as "the toughest assignment I ever had." Traveling widely in the "middle western part of America," he cultivated territory that would become the fiefdom of the Minneapolis distributors. To increase the market, he encouraged communities to open theaters. "My tactics were to go and see the mayor of each town as soon as I arrived, then get hold of some live wire who would know a good thing when he saw it, and sell him the idea of starting a picture show. . . . At the start

nobody would believe in it." The tenacious salesman, who thought he "must have been the pioneer of motion pictures in well over a hundred



*The Unique, 520 Hennepin Avenue, Minneapolis, 1908, which presented moving pictures from its opening in 1904. John Elliott, its long-time manager, became an important film distributor.*

towns," soon saw the movies "catch on like wild fire." Films were then in such demand that he had to order new prints of those that were worn out

<sup>40</sup> Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema*, 367, 417, 433–38; Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, 21–22; J. M. Mullin to The World Photographic Publishing Co., Feb. 25, 1909, in *Moving Picture World* 4 (Mar. 6, 1909): 274; *Moving Picture World* 5 (Oct. 23, 1909): 587, and 66 (Feb. 2, 1924): 360. Laemmle's other branches were in Evansville (Ind.), Omaha, Des Moines, Portland (Ore.), Salt Lake City, Montreal, and Winnipeg.

<sup>41</sup> Mildred L. Hartsough, *The Twin Cities as a Metropolitan Market: A Regional Study of the Economic Development of Minneapolis and St. Paul* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1925), 56–57; Kane and Ominsky, *Twin Cities*, 46, 49, 81, 83–84.

and compete with other distributors who reached “for the business of the new-born showmen whom I had created.”<sup>42</sup>

While Bryson was drumming up business for Laemmle as far west as Butte, Montana, a demand for films was building in Minnesota—soon to become the heart of the territory. In scattered communities outside the Twin Cities, from sawmilling and mining towns in the north to agricultural trading centers in the south, exhibitors were showing films in tents, town halls, opera houses, store fronts, and other venues. Whether experiencing motion pictures in a “black tent” pitched by a traveling showman or in the comparative comfort of an opera house, the audiences were creating a demand that would nourish Minneapolis’s nascent distribution business.<sup>43</sup>

**D**istributors and exhibitors alike soon had a sharp reminder that, important as local factors might be, national developments had an even more powerful impact on them. In 1908 the Edison Company and several other firms had organized the Motion Picture Patents Company, appropriately known as “the trust.” In keeping with a trend in American business evident from 1890s, the trust made bold moves toward nationwide control, attempting to monopolize everything from raw film stock through motion-picture production, exhibition, and distribution. Praised by some as an effort to bring stability to a chaotic new industry, where unauthorized duplication of films and violations of distributors’ rights ran rampant, the trust also triggered strong protests.<sup>44</sup>

In January 1909 Minnesota distributors and exhibitors learned that the trust, which controlled patents pooled by member firms, would begin charging them royalties in exchange for licenses to use or deal in films and equipment. The *Minneapolis Journal* reported local distributors’ and exhibitors’ grudging acceptance: “‘Yes, we will stick to the new combination,’ say the moving picture men. ‘We are stuck and we have got to stick.’” Exhibitors in the countryside, however, protested in letters “filled with the first outpourings of sudden wrath and tribulation.”<sup>45</sup>

In the end, only Van Duzee stuck. In February, the Mullin Film Service announced that its offices were handling films of producers, foreign and domestic, who were not members of the trust. Far more momentous was Carl Laemmle’s April “open letter to the trade,” which declared in bold type: “I HAVE QUIT THE PATENTS COMPANY.” He promised “NO MORE LICENSES! NO MORE HEART-BREAKS! Nothing but a straight business proposition, the best of films, the most reliable service, and prices that are within your easy reach.”<sup>46</sup>

Choosing the role of independent producer, Laemmle organized his own firm. Incorporated as the Yankee Films Company, it was soon renamed the Independent Moving Pictures Company of America, better known as IMP. Its first film was *Hiawatha*, chosen at the suggestion of Bryson and filmed in Minneapolis at Minnehaha Falls. Laemmle announced the release of the 998-foot film on October 25, 1909, with his customary panache. “Taken at the Falls of Minnehaha in the Land of the Dacotahs,” the advertisement read in part, “And you can bet it is classy or I wouldn’t make it my first release. . . . It is taken from Longfellow’s masterpiece of poesy and it is a gem of photography and acting. Following this I will release some more pictorial corkers and some screamingly funny stuff, bearing the true stamp of American humour.”<sup>47</sup>

**I**n 1910 Samuel L. Rothapfel, a Minnesota-born exhibitor who later became the impresario known as Roxy, observed that “motion pictures are no longer a fad—they are here to stay, and are sure to become the greatest source of amusement in this country.” Their influence had spread far beyond entertainment. Referring to an exhibition at the Minnesota State Fair, *The Farmer*, a St. Paul journal, stated in 1909 that “the gospel of better farming and a more efficient agricultural education will be materially advanced by means of moving picture ‘talks’ relating to the science of the soil.” Other films reported the news and taught work processes used in factories and offices. Still others were documentaries, illustrating such subjects as the vanishing herds of buffalo

<sup>42</sup> *Greater Amusements* (Minneapolis), Jan. 10, 1936, p. 2; *Minneapolis Star*, Apr. 15, 1933, p. 3.

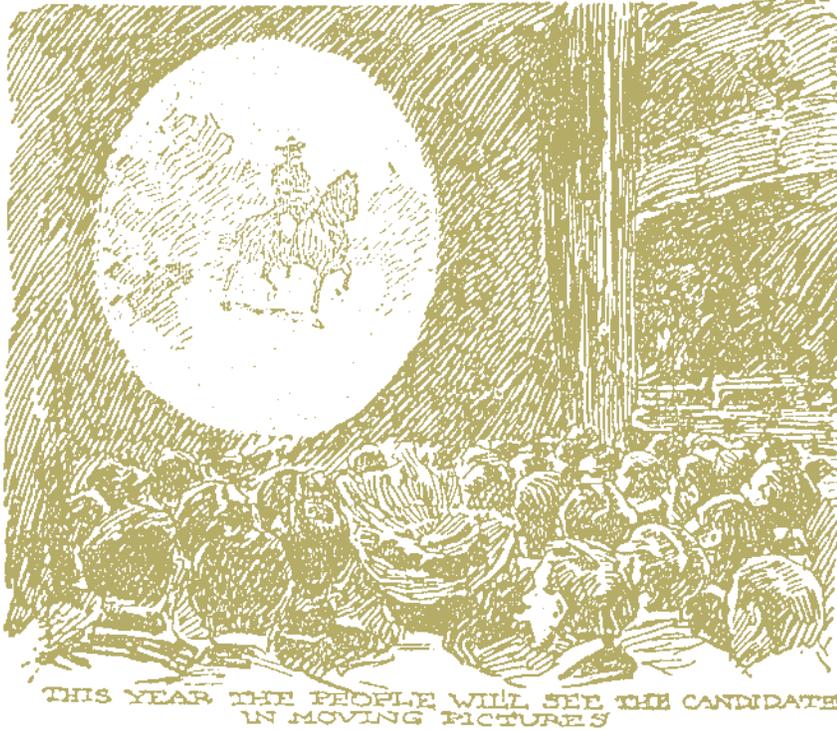
<sup>43</sup> Observations based on research in progress.

<sup>44</sup> Jowett, *Film*, 33–34.

<sup>45</sup> Jowett, *Film*, 33–34; Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, 29–33; *Minneapolis Journal*, Jan. 28, 1909, p. 6.

<sup>46</sup> *Moving Picture World* as follows: 5 (Aug. 14, 1909): 232; 4 (Mar. 6, 1909): 274; and 66 (Feb. 2, 1924): 360, reproducing Laemmle’s announcement.

<sup>47</sup> John Drinkwater, *The Life and Adventures of Carl Laemmle* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1931), 73–75. See also Bryson’s recollections in *Minneapolis Star*, Apr. 17, 1933, p. 14.



In 1908, as political parties began to choose their presidential hopefuls, the St. Paul Pioneer Press predicted that candidates would be seen on the big screen.

The pioneer moving-picture business in the Twin Cities not only reflected national trends but prepared the way for swift-paced growth that began in 1910. The number of movie houses increased from 15 in 1909 to a high of about 100 in 1916, and they outnumbered other theaters for the rest of the silent-pictures era. Distributors cultivated the territory Laemmle and others had opened, and exhibitors who learned the business in the storefront age helped foster trade associations and survived to witness Minnesotans, notably William A. (“Fighting Al”) Steffes, influencing events on the national scene. The theaters bore traces of the past as store fronts lingered, at least two legiti-

mate theaters turned to film exhibition, and the vaudeville-film combination continued in new houses.<sup>50</sup>

in the West and the “daily life of many tribes of Indians which are rapidly becoming extinct.”<sup>48</sup> Local commentators praised silent films as a medium “comprehensible to all races,” as educational tools, and as entertainment cheap enough to be widely available. Yet no one, perhaps, fully grasped how pervasive film’s influence would be. By 1908, according to filmmaker, critic, and historian Lewis Jacobs, motion pictures had become “a powerful medium of social expression.” Outside observers noted that “films were becoming for children and the uneducated one of the chief sources for new ideas, points of view, attitudes toward government and society, habits of mind, standards of taste, conduct, morals, canons of convention, culture.”<sup>49</sup>

Another link to the past was the condescending attitude toward moving pictures. Despite the appearance of notable films and fine theaters, invidious comparisons with legitimate theater continued, fueled perhaps by critics schooled in serious drama who did not always welcome assignments to review films. Although the new giant in mass entertainment overshadowed legitimate theater, serious drama continued to hold an elite position in the cities’ cultural establishment, as it had in 1896 when the Animatograph first flashed moving pictures upon a screen in the Bijou Opera House.

<sup>48</sup> S. L. Rothapfel, “Dignity of the Exhibitors’ Profession,” *Moving Picture World* 6 (Feb. 26, 1910): 289; *The Farmer* 27 (Nov. 15, 1909): 833; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Oct. 14, 1906, p. 27. Rothapfel was born in Stillwater in 1882; *St. Paul Dispatch*, Jan. 13, 1936, p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Duluth News Tribune*, Aug. 21, 1910, sec. 4, p. 2; *St. Paul Dispatch*, Oct. 25, 1908, sec. 4, p. 1; Jacobs, *Rise of the American Film*, 77.

<sup>50</sup> On Steffes, see *Greater Amusements* (Minneapolis), June 21, 1946, p. 4.

*The ad from the New York Clipper, p.348, is from a photocopy in the authors’ files. All other illustrations are in the MHS collections.*



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