What's On (or was on) at the Oatlands Town Hall, 1900-1935

One of the first "picture shows" to appear at the Town Hall was "Soldiers of the Cross", a multimedia production which many see as one of the first attempts at a feature film made in Australia. The show consisted of segments of film interspliced with coloured glass slides telling the story of Christ and various Christian martyrs. 'Soldiers of the Cross' appeared at the Oatlands Town Hall on Christmas night 1920, with Salvation Army 'Ambassador' Herbert Booth providing a live evangelistic lecture to accompany the show.
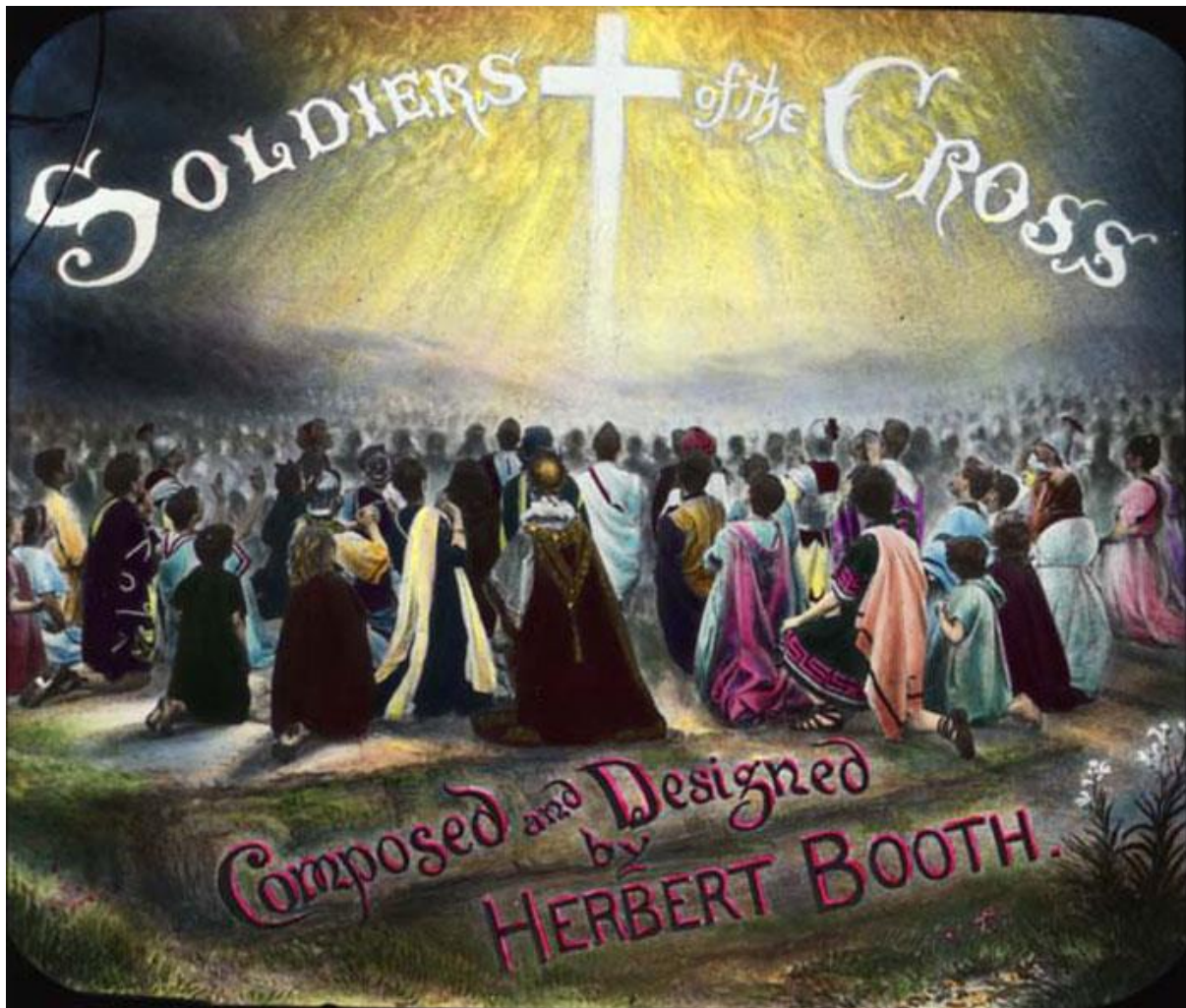

Figure 1: Opening slide from 'Soldiers of the Cross' (National Film & Sound Archive)

The earliest known picture show at the Town Hall was "The Story of the Kelly Gang" in September 1907. Directed by Charles Tait, the film premiered in Melbourne in December 1906 and generated huge interest. Like "Soldiers of the Cross", it was a landmark moment in Australian cinema, providing the first of its kind in the bushranging genre which dominated Australian film for decades. Nearly 30 years later,

one of the many sequels played at the Oatlands Town Hall (see below). At the time, promoters usually sent fliers for their shows ahead of time, which is how we know about some of these shows.

In December 1920, H.D. Nicholls leased the Assembly Room for displaying picture shows, although little is known of him. More effective use was made of the Assembly Room by Murray Jones, who was granted a 12-month lease of the Assembly Room in June 1923. Jones would operate picture shows at the Oatlands Town Hall until September 1931, when the 'Roxy' cinema was completed. Jones' operation included construction of an 'operating box' in the Town Hall as well as a shed in the rear of the building. Picture shows ran every Saturday from 6pm to 11 pm, with an agreement in Jones' lease "not to allow any dancing to take place after the exhibition of his motion pictures". After Murray Jones moved his operation to the Roxy, the only picture shows to be held at the Town Hall were organised by travelling picture show men such as the Bye Brothers and Charles Oriel Tilley.

Figure 1" Charles Oriel Tilley, who brought his picture show to Oatlands a number of times over the 1920s and 1930s (Tasmanian Archive & Heritage Office)

Figure 2: Poster advertising "The Latest Kelly Gang", screened at the Town Hall February 1933. This poster was sent to Oatlands Town Hall for advance promotions (Tasmanian Archive & Heritage Office)

Touring Acts

As soon as the Town Hall was opened in September 1881, a steady array of performers plied their wares on the Town Hall stage, although the majority of social events were local people putting on euchre tournaments, dances, bazaars, fundraising of every conceivable variety, political meetings and musical soirees by talented locals.

At first, professional performers were a bit put off by the inadequate stage arrangements (originally placed at the northern end, thereby obscuring two windows, and before the 1891 additions, lacking the necessary dressing rooms for performers to get into costume before appearing on stage. But the 1891 additions did indeed address these problems, making the Oatlands Town Hall a very attractive venue for itinerant performers and performing troupes of actors, singers, musicians, etc. Dancers also rated it highly, declaring it to have "one of the best dance floors in the colony[1]"

To give just a few examples, JD Foley, the 'King of Fun, whilst touring the state in 1921 visited the Oatlands Town Hall. Foley offered "an attractive, refined and Varied Programme consisting of Character Impersonations, Singing, Sketches, Droll Delineations, Songs of all Nations, Dancing, Musical Items, Characters from all corners of the Globe and Laughable Ventriloquism"[2]
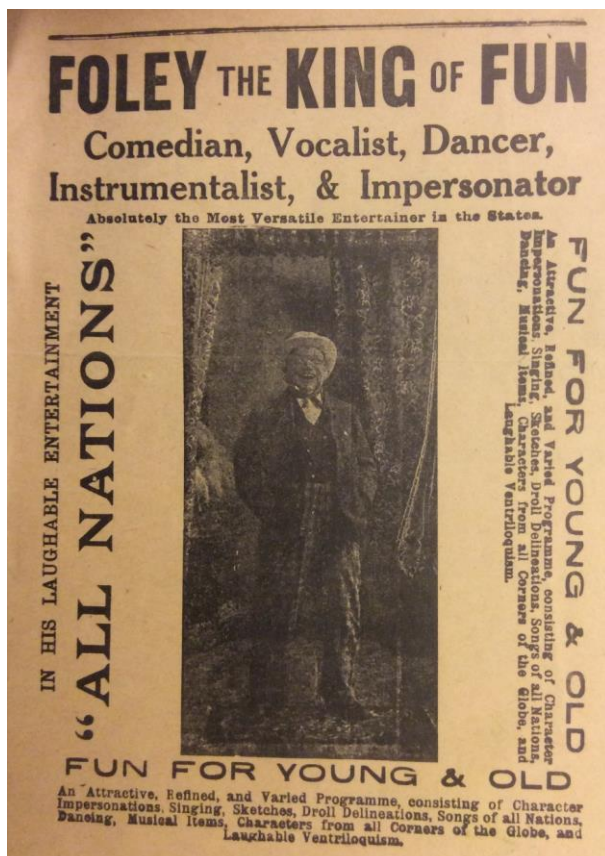

Figure 3: Flier sent to Oatlands Town Hall for advance promotion (Tasmanian Archive & Heritage Office)

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[1] *The* Mercury 7 September 1885 p.1
[2] Xxxxxx – promotional flier for "Foley the King of Fun"

About a decade after Foley's visit, the 'Great Barrie', well known magician, came to Oatlands. The Great Barrie's program included "19 items of Mystery and magic and mirth, including the greatest of all – SAWING A WOMAN IN HALVES in full view of the audience"[3]. The Great Barrie (also known as Cecil Barrie, managed by Mrs Barrie) appeared at the Oatlands Town Hall on 31st January 1933 ready to put on "the biggest mystery ever stage". As well as the 'sawing a woman in halves' routine, Barrie kept the people of Oatlands spellbound with "the Bottle and Glass Trick"; "great Indian sack trick", "Handcuff manipulations" and a musical number from Lady Teeney (aka Mrs Barrie) to enliven the mood.
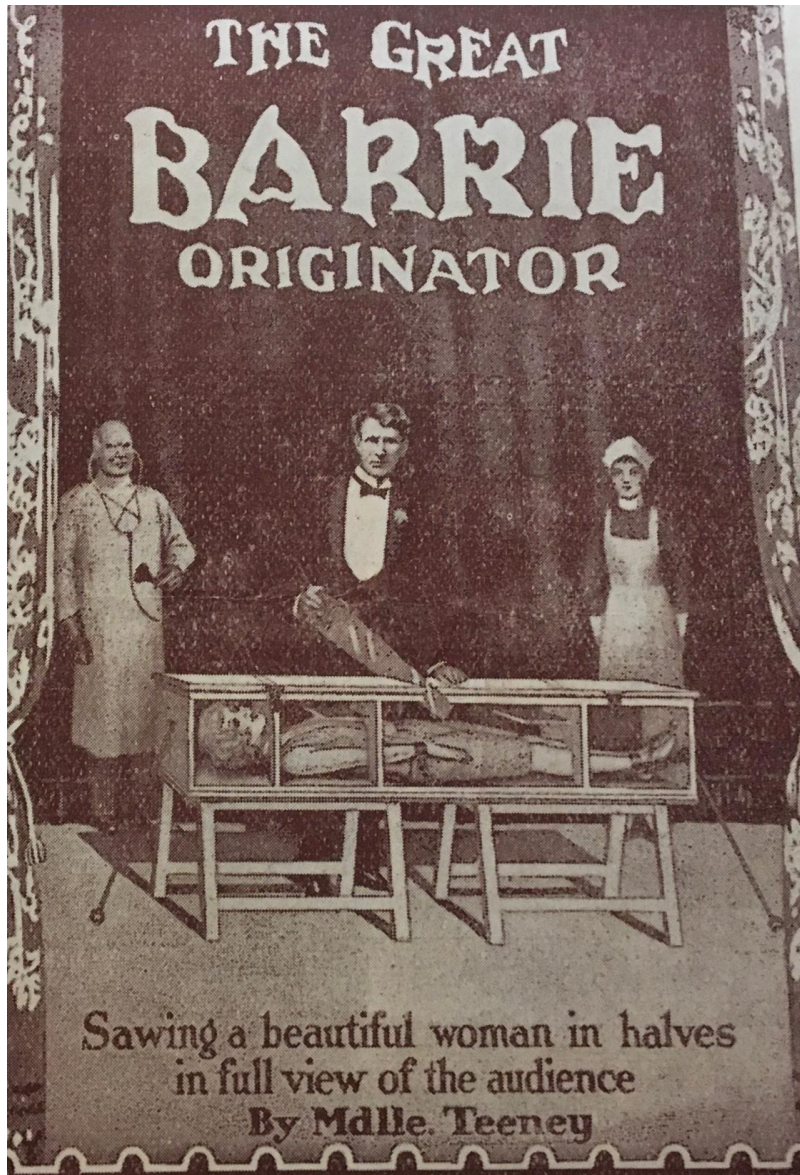

Figure 4: Barries' most famous trick (detail from flier sent to Oatlands Town Hall January 1933 - Tasmanian Archive & Heritage Office)

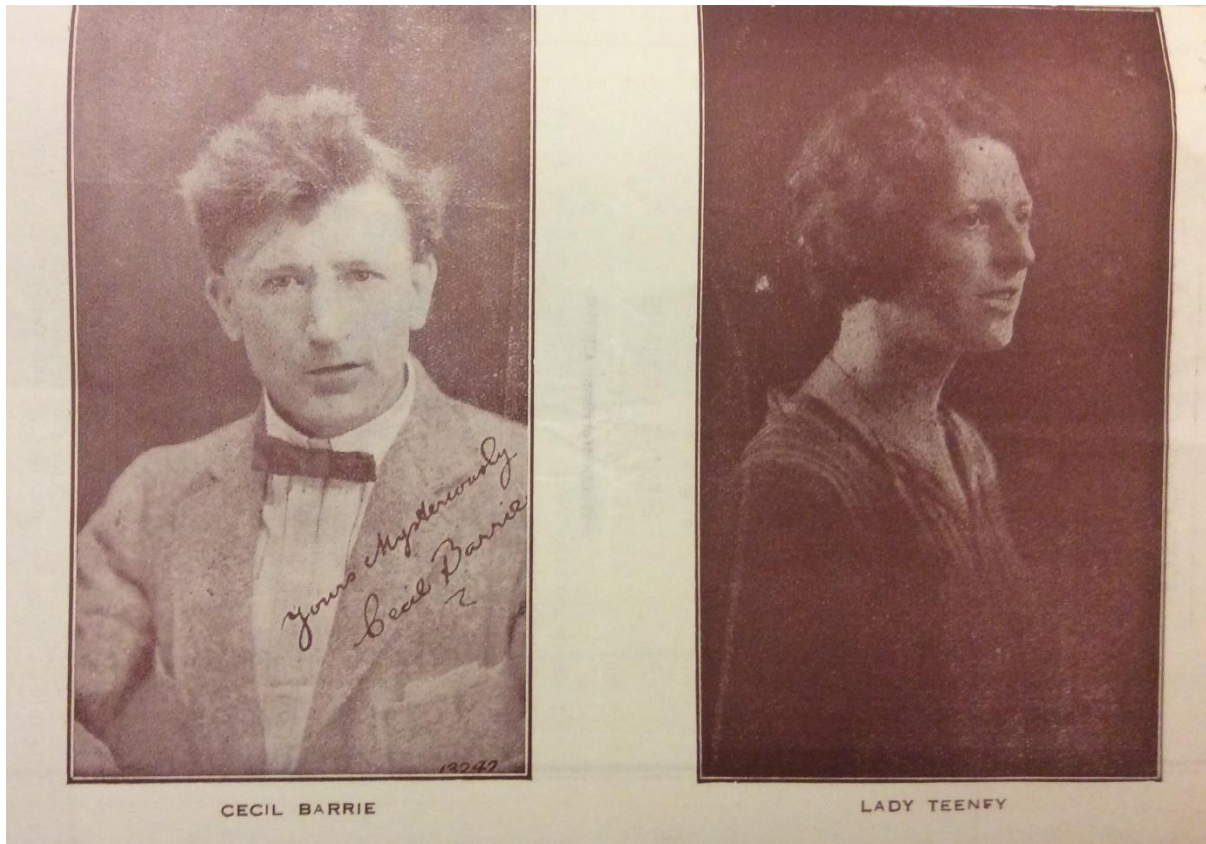[3] *Riverina Recorder* 28 September 1935 p2

Figure 5: Flier sent to Oatlands Town Hall January 1933 (Tasmanian Archive & Heritage Office)