

CHAPTER 3

WIDE-OPEN SCREENS:

Early Cinema in Saskatchewan

Paul S. Moore

Early in August 1913, a series of local moving pictures appeared at the Roseland Theatre in Regina, a unique chance for some of the people of Saskatchewan to see themselves on screen. The films were made by Edgar C. Rossie, a prominent local photographer, and intended for boosterist advertising in Great Britain and the United States. The program included reproductions of recent events, such as the official greeting of the Duke of Connaught at Regina, the celebration of North Battleford becoming a city, and an “Indian Parade” at Fort Qu’Appelle. Reaction to the local films in 1913 reflects an ambivalent combination of resentment of and attraction to mass entertainment on the prairies, already dominated by films from the United States. The *Regina Leader* reported that “the frequent appearance of the Union Jack was quite in contrast to the display of the Stars and Stripes so familiar in a larger percentage of the films shown in the city,”¹ yet Rossie’s pictures were slightly out of focus. Appreciation of local images was tinged with disappointment when held up against the supposed production quality of commercial, American films.²

1 “Lt.-Governor Saw Local ‘Movie’ Scenes,” *Regina Leader*, August 7, 1913.

2 Peter Urquhart reviews the current state of the perception of failure of Canadian

Joining the “imagined community” of a mass public required the “partial non-identity” of a perspective shared with strangers at a distance.³ Like the 1913 audience in Regina, seeing ourselves onscreen is not wholly satisfying if we cannot imagine audiences elsewhere enjoying the film. Yet it is clear that Saskatchewan audiences were enjoying films. The same month an article in the *Yorkton Enterprise* detailed the work of the new provincial Board of Censors, who “have found themselves confronted with a task which daily grows more onerous as the public taste for the ‘cinemas’ is catered to by an increasing number of houses. There are now 80 picture palaces in Saskatchewan, in cities, towns, and villages.”⁴ The movies were already a big business, anchored in dozens of theatres across Saskatchewan in communities of all sorts.

This history of the movie business begins stymied by the rectangular borderlines of the province, which can be taken as a screen with its boundaries masked from outside to create a space without contour—a wide-open screen. On the map, the province of Saskatchewan is a space drawn to pit Canadian nationalism against American expansionism, but this observation accepts an official definition of the territory’s creation as a mere ward of the Canadian national project: built upon administrative institutions of mounted police, railway, settlement, and tariff, a link in the coast-to-coast chain of the dominion’s provinces, intended less to assert independence from the United States than to regulate reciprocity across the border.⁵ Mass culture and entertainment should be added to the list of institutions that project a Maple Leaf logo onto Saskatchewan from the outside, nominally Canadian but acting mainly to disperse the commercial, mass culture of American movies, a point that a number of contributors to *Overlooking Saskatchewan: Minding the Gap* make in different ways.⁶

Since the earliest travelling cinema in Canada, showmen have made a point of stopping in Saskatchewan, yet it has often been as a mere whistle stop to fill the gap between Winnipeg and Vancouver. Regina, especially, has been a key link in building Canadian theatre

productions in “Film and Television: A Success?,” in *Cultural Industries.ca*, ed. Ira Wagman and Peter Urquhart (Toronto: Lorimer, 2012), 17–32.

3 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 2006); Michael Warner, *Publics and Counter-Publics* (New York: Zone, 2005).

4 “Work of Moving Picture Censors,” *Yorkton Enterprise*, August 21, 1913.

5 Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).

6 Paul S. Moore, *Now Playing: Early Moviegoing and the Regulation of Fun* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 153–97.

chains, though the chain character of many urban Saskatchewan commercial movie theatres begs the question of whether these gathering places are essentially interchangeable with movie theatres built everywhere else. This problem might be endemic to any business or cultural history of Saskatchewan.⁷ The following business history of cinema in Saskatchewan provides local details within a template more or less standardized across North America. The key distinctions are not between Saskatchewan and elsewhere but between the bigger cities and the periphery within the province. The puffery and hype through which moving pictures were exhibited, and theatres were planned and built, promised to make each locale connected to all others.

1897: Prairie Pictures in an Itinerant Context

Cinema standardized commercial entertainment in the twentieth century because its content was manufactured and distributed as an industrial product in a mass market. Commercial amusements had arrived on the Canadian prairies with the railway in the late nineteenth century, but before cinema there was little distinction among public gatherings for civic, political, and religious purposes or between local amateur productions and itinerant professional entertainments. Considered collectively, amusements in the late nineteenth century were well integrated into local culture. Whatever its content, whether a distant or local production, attending a show at the town hall was an irregular but nonetheless routine part of prairie culture. Of course, the town newspaper—the archive of these amusements—was itself a purveyor of commerce and modern metropolitan connections.⁸

While the origins of cinema technology are debatable, the novel-

7 On the problem of prairie literature, see Alison Calder and Robert Wardhaugh, “When Is the Prairie?,” in *History, Literature, and the Writing of the Canadian Prairies*, ed. Alison Calder and Robert Wardhaugh (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2005), 3–24. With regard to contemporary cinema, see Christine Ramsay, “Made in Saskatchewan!,” in *Self-Portraits: The Cinemas of Canada since Telefilm*, ed. Andrea Loiselle and Tom McSorley (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 2006), 203–35.

8 I explain the distinct functions of big-city, small-city, and small-town newspapers as collectively constituting a regional mass market. See Paul S. Moore, “The Social Biograph: Newspapers as Archives of the Regional Mass Market for Movies,” in *Explorations in New Cinema History*, ed. Richard Maltby, Philippe Meers, and Daniel Biltereyst (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011), 263–79. Methodologically, I follow Franco Moretti’s attention to the standardized circulation of cultural texts, as outlined in *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (New York: Verso, 2007).

ty became commercially available worldwide in 1896.⁹ Moving pictures were shown in every present-day Canadian province and most Canadian towns by the end of 1897. In fact, cinema showed up in Manitoba before anywhere in Ontario and before anywhere in Canada other than Montreal. Edison's "Vitascope" debuted in Canada in Winnipeg on July 18, 1896, exhibited in a downtown hall during the Western Industrial Fair for a week before spending two weeks in Brandon.¹⁰ Brought to Manitoba by Richard A. Hardie of Winnipeg, these first projections of the new entertainment began a few days prior to the Vitascope's official, licensed appearance in Ottawa, long presumed to be the debut of cinema in Canada.¹¹ With Edison's celebrity behind it, the Vitascope claimed the title of "invention" as the first projected, paying, public exhibition of moving pictures in North America when it opened in New York in April 1896, dismissing earlier efforts as experiments. In France, the Lumière brothers had introduced even earlier their "Cinematographe" to Paris in December 1895, and this apparatus arrived in North America via Montreal to become the first exhibition of moving pictures in Canada on June 27, 1896.¹² Throughout the following year, cinema spread rapidly as projection machines and copies of films became available for purchase by enterprising entrepreneurs and showmen. Cinema initially followed this established path when entrepreneurial showmen with brand-new

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- 9 André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, "Introduction," in *American Cinema 1890–1909: Themes and Variations*, ed. André Gaudreault (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 1–21.
- 10 I give a nation-wide overview in Paul S. Moore, "Mapping Early Cinema's Mass Circulation: Cinema Debuts Coast-to-Coast in Canada in 1896 and 1897," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 21, 1 (2012): 58–80; "The Vitascope," *Winnipeg Tribune*, July 20, 1896; "The Vitascope," *Brandon Sun*, July 30, 1896. I am indebted to Robert Seiler for mentioning the notice in Brandon, which led me to the earlier notice in Winnipeg and the later one in Carberry, also referencing Portage La Prairie. The details of Hardie's involvement come from a report in the *Carberry Express*, August 13, 1896. In 1892, Hardie had toured an Edison phonograph across the prairies in combination with a stereopticon slide show, a foreshadowing of his early adoption of Edison's Vitascope. See notes in *Manitoba Free Press*, April 16 and 25, 1892.
- 11 "Edison's Vitascope," *Ottawa Journal*, July 20, 1896; Peter Morris, *Embattled Shadows: A History of Canadian Cinema, 1895–1939* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978), 11–13. Ottawa as the debut of cinema in Canada originates with the claims of the showman at those performances, John C. Green. As early as 1917, he was insisting in the *Canadian Moving Picture Digest*, March 10, 1917, 1498, that the earlier shows in Montreal in fact came later. See also *Canadian Moving Picture Digest*, May 9, 1925, 3.
- 12 "Une merveille," *Montreal La Presse*, June 15, 1896; "Le Cinematographe," *Montreal La Presse*, June 29, 1896; Germaine Lacasse, "Cultural Amnesia and the Birth of Film in Canada," *Cinema Canada* 108 (1984): 6–7.

moving picture projectors first toured across present-day Saskatchewan in 1897. Surprisingly low costs resulted from its electric technology and mass-produced content, allowing this novelty amusement to include small towns on even these earliest exhibition circuits. The novel technology also immediately allowed competition to proliferate. Some early showmen turned to experiments in local filmmaking in order to distinguish their shows from those of competitors. Others partnered with established touring vaudeville companies.

The Royal Anamatagraph and Specialty Company brought moving pictures to the Assiniboia Territory with shows in Moosomin on Friday and Saturday, August 6 and 7, 1897.¹³ This “Anamatagraph” was owned by William McCarthy of Rat Portage (now Kenora), who had first partnered with the Cosgrove Comedy Company to debut his new apparatus in northern Ontario in May 1897.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Hardie had brought a new projector to Winnipeg, an Edison “Projecting Kinetoscope,” presented to a specially invited audience of officials from the railways and local government—laying the seeds for his plan to film scenes of Manitoba to promote immigration to and settlement of the prairies.¹⁵ After supporting the Cosgroves for two months, McCarthy assembled his own company of variety performers in July and began a tour westward along the main Canadian Pacific Railway route, bringing moving pictures to the present-day provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta in August and September 1897. Hardly abandoned, the Cosgroves and Hardie paired to complete the tour of Manitoba and proceeded westward themselves, just a few weeks behind McCarthy.

The first Assiniboia Territory shows of the Anamatagraph in Moosomin got a surprisingly discriminating review. Of the various depictions of scenic views, action, comedy, and human drama typical of the early Edison roster, “‘The burning stable’ was probably the most effective. ‘The boxing cats’ was very funny. ‘Going to the fire’ was short but realistic. ‘The Cavalry charge’ was a rather tame affair. The last picture was the ‘kissing scene’ taken, we believe, from a play. It was certainly very realistic and brought down the house.”¹⁶

13 “The Anamatagraph,” *Moosomin Spectator*, August 5, 1897.

14 “Rat Portage District,” *Manitoba Free Press*, April 22, 1897; *Fort William Weekly Journal*, May 8, 1897.

15 “City and Country,” *Manitoba Free Press*, June 2, 1897. A later article about Hardie indeed claimed that he had been the first to make moving pictures of Manitoba, even printing a photograph of Hardie with his “Kinetoscope.” See “First Picture Machine to Reach Winnipeg,” *Manitoba Free Press*, August 20, 1921.

16 “The Anamatagraph,” *Moosomin Spectator*, August 12, 1897.

Still, the *Moosomin Spectator* continued, “its performances are well worth the very low admission charged by the company,” a remarkable judgment given that the cost was twenty-five or thirty-five cents a ticket. The show proceeded to Whitewood, Regina, Indian Head, and Qu’Appelle Station¹⁷ and was met with appreciation, “drawing full houses,” noted the *Regina Leader*, before explaining just what the Anamatagraph was: “a sort of magic lantern exhibition of kineoscopic pictures—photographs of motion.”¹⁸ The selection of films included representations of prize fights, fire brigade runs, and bathing scenes, though the live performance nonetheless prompted the more detailed commentary. The correspondent for the *Qu’Appelle Vidette* described the “moving views” as a “wonderful product of scientific invention” but was also surprisingly critical of the relative entertainment value of the various pictures: “More views and less of singing would probably make the entertainment more enjoyable to most.”¹⁹ The Anamatagraph’s advance publicity for its next shows in Moose Jaw noted that the company had “played two crowded houses in Regina, which is something no other travelling show has done for some time.”²⁰ The ballyhoo in Moose Jaw might actually have led to disappointment, as the company’s three nights, its lengthiest engagement of the tour, were greeted with only “a fairly good house each evening.”²¹ Proceeding to Lethbridge and other stops in the Alberta Territory, the Anamatagraph returned to the Assiniboia Territory for two nights in Maple Creek, before a second time around in Moose Jaw, where attendance was so limited that “the company did not think it worth while to fulfill their engagement.”²² Stung by this failure, the company created a little novelty for the repeat shows in Regina by including the citizens’ band in the entertainment.²³

A new set of films soon came to the Assiniboia Territory with Hardie’s Projecting Kinetoscope joined by the Cosgrove Comedy Company. Being second and having to compete against the Anamatagraph’s reputation, the Cosgrove-Kinetoscope combination focused less on promotion and advertising in newspapers, spent fewer nights in each stop, and had to tour more extensively by including Saltcoats, York-

17 *Regina Standard*, August 12, 1897; *Regina Leader*, August 19, 1897; *Qu’Appelle Vidette*, August 11 and 18, 1897; *Qu’Appelle Progress*, August 12, 1897.

18 *Regina Leader*, August 19, 1897.

19 *Qu’Appelle Vidette*, August 25, 1897.

20 *Moose Jaw Times*, August 20, 1897.

21 *Moose Jaw Times*, August 27, 1897.

22 *Moose Jaw Times*, September 24, 1897.

23 *Regina Standard*, September 23, 1897.

ton, Wolseley, Fort Qu'Appelle, and Prince Albert on the itinerary.²⁴ Hardie's primary means of distinguishing the Kinetoscope was a set of pictures of Manitoba prairie farms, Winnipeg streetscapes and comotion, and the Canadian Pacific Railway. These moving pictures were the first produced on the Canadian prairies and some of the first in all of Canada. They have routinely been accredited to James S. Freer, a well-known limelight lecturer from Brandon, because he was later inducted into the scheme to accompany the films to the United Kingdom in 1898, where they were indeed used to promote immigration and investment.²⁵ Freer rearranged the scenes of prairie farms, landscapes, and railways into a lecture about his own "Ten Years in Manitoba."²⁶ During the earlier first exhibitions closer to home in 1897, the films were already noted as intended for immigration promotion in the "old country," and the Canadian Pacific Railway and Manitoba government were already involved as sponsors.²⁷ The most notable scene showed Manitoba premier Greenway at work in his own fields, mentioned, for example, after the show in Qu'Appelle Station.²⁸ The same films soon arrived two more times early in 1898. Now competitors instead of partners, Hardie's Ideals and the Cosgrove Comedy Company set out across the Assiniboia and Alberta Territories, on each other's heels. In the six months since moving pictures had first arrived in the Assiniboia Territory (Saskatchewan) in August 1897, the territory had been crisscrossed four times, and at least a dozen towns and cities had hosted the novelty entertainment.

The Picture Show Takes Root

Cinema continued as an itinerant entertainment supporting travelling live acts as first happened in 1897. It took another decade for mov-

24 There was a one-week gap in the Cosgroves' tour between Minnedosa and Hamiota in Manitoba. The most sensible explanation is time spent touring up the Manitoba and North West Territories Railway to Yorkton, though the Cosgroves were not noted visiting the area at this time in the newly created *Saltcoats Siftings*. The newspaper does mention, though, that a medicine show of Professor Sutton, accompanied by Mr. Giddings's "Magniscope," visited Yorkton and Saltcoats late in 1897, and the Cosgroves were definitely noted visiting these towns with their Kinetoscope early in 1898. See Saltcoats and Yorkton columns, *Saltcoats Siftings*, December 9, 1897, and January 18, 1898.

25 On Freer's involvement, see "Scenes for England," *Manitoba Free Press*, December 9, 1897. Freer has been mistaken as the filmmaker, rather than merely the lecturer, because of his vital and high-profile role in escorting these early Canadian scenes on tour in the United Kingdom. See Morris, *Embattled Shadows*, 30–31.

26 *Manitoba Free Press*, December 9, 1897.

27 *Carberry News*, September 3, 1897.

28 *Qu'Appelle Progress*, September 30, 1897.

ing pictures to spawn permanent sites for daily amusement. By 1902, at first on the Pacific coast, showmen began leasing storefronts to open “Electric” or “Edison” theatres. These earliest picture theatres spawned two developments: the western expansion of big-time live vaudeville in bigger cities, and the small-time showmanship of independent picture shows in almost every town. First came the continental spread of vaudeville circuits, with three major companies covering the territory from Chicago to the Pacific coast: Orpheum, Pantages, and Sullivan and Considine. The latter two were intense rivals, both headquartered in Seattle but straddling the Canadian border, at first with theatres in Vancouver but by 1914 all the way to Winnipeg and points in between.²⁹ Pantages eventually had the larger theatres and better acts, and expanded more cautiously, sending out its acts on other showmen’s regional circuits, such as W. B. Sherman’s chain of vaudeville theatres on the Canadian prairies, including in Saskatoon and Moose Jaw. By 1912, Sullivan and Considine’s smaller Empress theatres were strung along the northern route of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway, including Prince Albert, Saskatoon, North Battleford, and Lloydminster in Saskatchewan. A Saskatchewan link in the big-time vaudeville circuit came with an Orpheum stop at the Regina Theatre beginning in November 1912.³⁰ All-star vaudeville shows under the Orpheum banner spent week-long stops along the Canadian Pacific Railway route from Winnipeg to Regina and then Calgary, skipping over the smaller cities.

As big-time vaudeville circuits took root in Saskatchewan at the Regina Theatre, “electric” theatres spawned picture shows in ever-smaller cities and towns. A scattered few remained open from 1903 to 1906, including in Winnipeg and Calgary, but they were short lived or quickly became proper vaudeville theatres. Smaller cities still received cinema through itinerant travelling shows until 1907, when almost simultaneously all across the continent independent entrepreneurial showmen converted long, narrow, commercial store spaces into small theatres in every city and within just a few years in almost every town. The Edison Family Theatre in Regina opened on October 7, 1907, on Broad Street in a storefront within the McCarthy Department Store block. The initial owner, Don Jarret, and the manager, Charles Clark, had “been in the city all the summer under canvas,” but now they were moving into permanent quarters, “continuing their

29 Taso G. Lagos, “Film Exhibition in Seattle, 1897–1912: Leisure Activity in a Scraggly, Smelly Frontier Town,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 23, 2 (2003): 101–15.

30 “Regina Theatre,” *Regina Leader*, November 16, 1912.

programme of moving pictures and illustrated songs.”³¹ Admission was fifteen cents, explaining why picture shows on the prairies were never known as “five-cent” or “nickel” shows, as they were commonly called in Ontario, or “nickelodeons,” the American term that has become the generic label for these early theatres.³² As later remembered by Dalton Fisher, an employee who soon owned the show and later became the first provincial theatre inspector, “Seating capacity was 165, seats were ordinary kitchen chairs with a plank running underneath them to hold them together.”³³ New owners renovated and introduced a change of programming early in 1908. Employing ushers to seat patrons, the management promised in their advertisement that “nothing will be seen or heard at this theatre that may possibly offend the most fastidious.”³⁴

In Saskatoon, the Kevin Theatre opened in 1907 but changed its name to the Bijou by the end of the year. Bijou was the most common name for early picture shows, as others followed in 1908 in Moose Jaw and Prince Albert, plus the Regina Old City Hall was briefly renamed Bijou that year. Competition arose from Automat Arcades in Regina and Moose Jaw, which combined moving picture theatres with parlours of kinoscope “peepshow” and gramophone machines. Many of the earliest shows were rebuilt and renamed frequently, changing owners even more often, and soon the Automat Arcade in Regina was called the Unique, the one in Moose Jaw the Lyric. In cities, picture theatres multiplied because of low costs and easy distribution. By 1909, in addition to older town hall theatres, there were three storefront picture shows operating in both Moose Jaw and Saskatoon and five in Regina. The Savoy, the third to open in Moose Jaw, used overstatement in its daily advertising to exaggerate minor differences from the competition. Promoting its opening in May 1909, the Savoy was coyly described as “Just a Little Picture Show! But It’s Just a Wee Bit Better than the Rest.”³⁵ It was later reported that “crowded houses at each performance greeted the opening programme,” though

31 Advertisement and note in “City and Country” column, *Regina Leader*, October 4, 1907.

32 For an overview of the nickelodeon era, see Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema America, 1900–1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907–1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

33 “Story of Theatrical Regina from the Early Days,” *Regina Leader*, October 13, 1917; see also “Kitchen Chairs Used as Seats in First Theatre,” *Regina Leader-Post*, July 27, 1942.

34 Advertisement in *Regina Leader*, January 28, 1908.

35 *Moose Jaw Times*, May 7, 1909.

the newspaper proceeded to reprint a mere puff piece: “The Savoy is a cosy little house, well fitted up, beautifully lighted with electricity, and provided with emergency exits. The entrance is very attractive. Plenty of space, a nice box office and an altogether ornate appearance.”³⁶ Even a year later the Savoy’s management designed their daily advertising with masterful self-congratulation. The theatre rightly claimed to be “always original, even in advertising,” among a list of eight “undeniable” facts about the theatre, including a prompt to confirm its “spotless reputation” among its female patrons.³⁷

THE SAVOY

Some Really Good Pictures TO-NIGHT

**ANOTHER GREAT COWBOY PICTURE
A BRIDE WON BY BRAVERY ∴ ∴
AND FOUR OTHER SPECIAL PICTURES**

THESE FACTS ARE UNDENIABLE:

1. We are the only theatre to change our programme **THREE** times a week.
2. The Savoy has a "**SPOTLESS REPUTATION.**" Ask our lady patrons.
3. The **ONLY** theatre with fire exit doors. No panic can ever occur.
4. We have the **BEST** illustrated song singer and lady pianist.
5. Our promises are **ALWAYS** kept.
6. The cleanest, best ventilated and comfortable theatre in the city.
7. Every reputable film exchange **SEEKS** our custom, we being the largest film users in the city.
8. We are always "**ORIGINAL, EVEN IN ADVERTISING.**"

Savoy advertising. The “undeniable” facts about the Savoy Theatre included the claim that it was “always original, even in advertising.” *Moose Jaw Times*, May 11, 1910.

³⁶ *Moose Jaw Times*, May 10, 1909.

³⁷ *Moose Jaw Times*, May 11, 1910.

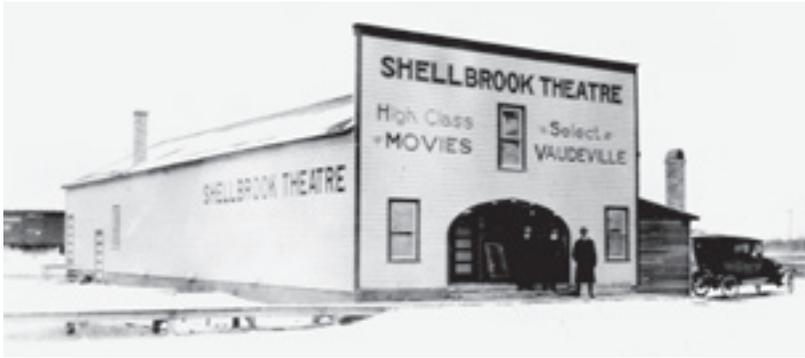
As showmen began fiercely competing in the cities, picture shows began to open in small towns too. A *Billboard Magazine* list of picture shows open by the end of 1910 indicates that everyday life now included commercial entertainment in at least ten other places in Saskatchewan besides the three larger cities: Estevan, Grenfell, Indian Head, Moosomin, Prince Albert, Swift Current, Weyburn, Wolseley, and Yorkton. Still clustered in the more populous south, along the main CPR route allowing easier and cheaper distribution of films, the remaining itinerant showmen now travelled to more remote and smaller towns. For example, a two-night stop in Humboldt in January 1911 was promoted as a special occasion for townfolk: “Look Out for the Enterprise Moving Pictures. Magnificent Feature Films.”³⁸ Only a few weeks later the local newspaper announced how “Humboldt May Have a Bijou,” taking a Regina showman’s visit to scout for a theatre site as an indication that the town was keeping up with the modern life of leisure associated with cities: “It is only a matter of a short time until Humboldt will be just the same as the other large centres of the province, with Bijous, Starlands, and other places of entertainment, where the citizens can go any evening and spend a few hours pleasantly.”³⁹ The Lux Theatre did indeed open in Bushey’s Hall in June 1911. However, reports about the new Doric in 1912 mention that the town’s first electric light generator would be part of the theatre—a reminder of how few modern amenities were available to small-town Saskatchewan until well into the century, as Bill Waiser’s chapter in this volume also attests.⁴⁰ Permanent movie theatres thus beckoned the modernization of smaller towns in the north of Saskatchewan (though not to the isolated far north). The Lyric was open in North Battleford by 1911 and by 1913 the Isis in Lloydminster, the Majestic in Biggar, and the Elite in Wilkie—all now nicknamed “movie” theatres. The cheap and easy leisure of an “idle hour” remained a luxury that required explanation and prodding as late as 1919, when the Community Theatre in Battleford addressed “Our Country Neighbors” in its advertising. “We are putting on real good shows at each performance, which will provide just the relaxation of mind which is so necessary to the ‘Country Gentleman’ and his family, as well as to the town folk. Why not get in town an hour earlier, so as to get your business done, and be ready for a little recreation? Try it.”⁴¹

38 *Humboldt Journal*, January 26, 1911.

39 *Humboldt Journal*, April 20, 1911.

40 *Saskatoon Phoenix*, March 6, 1912.

41 *Battleford Press*, January 30, 1919.



Shellbrook Theatre. Showmen Davis and Campbell opened the Shellbrook Theatre in Peterson's Hall around New Year's Day 1915 and soon established a small circuit, showing on Tuesdays in Parkside, Wednesdays in Canwood, Thursdays in Rozilee, and weekends in Shellbrook. Courtesy of the Saskatchewan Archives Board, Item R-A8353.

Movie theatres became enduring local institutions in towns and cities across Saskatchewan, with larger and more ornate theatres built every year. The movies were becoming a big business, not just for independent showmen in scattered towns across the continent, but also for a different kind of showman, more attuned to the tools of modern management and expansion through both economies of scale and selling shares to investors. Combining a string of theatres into a chain added the peculiar prestige of a brand name to individual theatres, a necessary distinction since the same films were distributed to independent theatres and chain theatres alike. Vaudeville chains provided the variety required of amusement by touring their embodied performers around their circuits. Movies and movie stars attached to specific studios soon came to be treated as precious talent and brand names.⁴² The earliest chains of picture shows were regional in scope. On the prairies was Paul LeMarquand's Starland Ltd. By the end of 1909, the company was formally incorporated and operated theatres all along the line from Lake Superior to the Rockies, including in Saskatoon. Ownership of the Elite Theatre in Regina came in 1910, bringing the chain's total to ten sites, plus two newly built theatres ready to open in Lethbridge and Prince Albert.⁴³ Opening a New York office and shifting into distribution late in 1913 turned out to be financially fatal moves, and the prairie's own cinema chain was in its last days.⁴⁴

42 Richard DeCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Janet Staiger, *The Studio System* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995).

43 "Starland Company Opening Theatre Here," *Lethbridge Herald*, October 5, 1910.

44 "New Theatre Circuit," *Manitoba Free Press*, October 8, 1913.

Saskatchewan on Screen

In the advance promotion for Hardie's Ideals in 1898, the *Grenfell Sun* noted that Hardie "carries his animated photo camera with him and if the weather is favorable, he may be induced to make a picture in Grenfell. This would naturally assist in bringing our town before the world."⁴⁵ Perhaps it was the weather, but unfortunately there was no indication that Hardie actually produced any pictures west of the Manitoba border. Locally produced moving pictures in Saskatchewan did not have their spotlight until 1913. As the Saskatchewan government established the Board of Censors and more bureaucratic licensing and inspection, prominent Regina photographer Edgar C. Rossie was sponsored to train in taking moving pictures and mandated to produce a series of scenes of provincial happenings, intended to promote the province as a place to invest and settle.⁴⁶ The origin and extent of Rossie's government mandate remain unclear. Rossie certainly aimed to profit himself, as well, and listed moving pictures among his commercial photographic services in his advertising that year.⁴⁷ His Saskatchewan films made their debut at the Roseland Theatre in Regina on August 6, 1913, reviewed in detail in the *Regina Leader*: "These subjects are of great local interest, and have been specially taken by the Provincial Government."⁴⁸ The first films depicted scenes from the official visit to Regina of Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught, to officially open the new legislature building in October 1912.

Excitement was keen, but the quality was lamented. Lieutenant Governor George W. Brown attended the first show, and "he appeared greatly amused at the reproductions of his likeness, and so well pleased was he with the pictures that he had a number of friends visit the exhibition later on in the day." Also on the program were films of the celebration of North Battleford becoming the fifth city of the province in May 1913 and an "Indian Parade" at Fort Qu'Appelle. One of the evening shows, it was noted, was attended by an entire marching band of Boy Scouts, who "enjoyed the pictures immensely, especially those taken at the Fort town, in which they appeared to be running at great speed while in the act of playing their instruments." Indeed, the *Regina Leader* reported that "hundreds of Regina people had the satisfaction, or the dissatisfaction as the case may be, of seeing their likeness reproduced in moving pictures." The official pro-

45 "Hardie's Ideals," *Grenfell Sun*, January 20, 1898.

46 On Rossie's career as a photographer, see Brock V. Silversides, "Edgar Rossie: Dean of Saskatchewan Photographers," *Saskatchewan History* 42, 1 (1989): 11-27.

47 For example, *Regina Leader*, August 2, 1913.

48 "Lt-Governor Saw Local 'Movie' Scenes," *Regina Leader*, August 7, 1913.

cessions and parades were turned into humorous occasions because Rossie had filmed them to be shown fast, “making everyone appear to be running,” though the newspaper nonetheless attested that “their appearance in the East and in the States will no doubt be a splendid means of advertising for the Capital City of Saskatchewan, as well as other localities in the province.”⁴⁹

The only complaint about the first pictures was Rossie’s inability to get the action in good focus consistently, and thus the next film, of the Regina Regatta, was promoted almost uniquely as “a clean and steady picture” when advertised days later. This time the *Regina Leader* raved about the quality, and the scene was described in great detail:

Perfect moving pictures of the recent regatta held on Wascana Lake. These pictures are part of the series taken by E.C. Rossie, but differ from those shown in the earlier part of the week by reason of the fact that the film is almost perfect. Speed, focus, exposure, and developing are nearly as good as any moving picture film turned out by professionals. The Parliament Buildings form a splendid background, and the lake from the position taken by the camera gives the impression of a huge bay. Yachts, row-boats, motor boats, and canoes go to make up a splendid picture, and the impression gained after witnessing the production of the film is that Regina is possessed of a splendid body of water. The film is worthy of being placed on the circuit, and should prove a great advertising medium for the city.⁵⁰

Two weeks later came general views of Regina, played in combination with pictures of the Winnipeg Stampede that had coincidentally been on the regular bill at the Roseland Theatre (shown August 25–26, 1913). Next came moving pictures of the Regina Fairgrounds and the fair’s stock parade, exhibited a month after the event itself (shown August 29–30). They were followed by more of Regina’s “leading events for 1913, a new and complete set of views [that] will be used by the city for advertising purposes,” according to the daily advertising in the *Regina Leader*. In less than a month, ten days of programming at the Roseland Theatre had been devoted to local scenes—more than a third of that month’s shows—but the theatre

49 Ibid.

50 “Moving Pictures of Regatta Are Good,” *Regina Leader*, August 9, 1913.

was eager to indicate that regular, entertaining, feature productions were coming soon: “Sarah Bernhardt in Queen Elizabeth, James K. Hackett in the Prisoner of Zenda” (promoted September 1–2). A full month later came a single, final, public show of one of Rossie’s pictures, the *Regina Labour Day Parade* (shown October 1–2), this time in combination with a Tom Mix western, *The Law and the Outlaw*. Local pictures had their brief spotlight, but the moment had passed quickly. Rossie continued to make the occasional local film for the next few years, but only one remains in the archives: local battalions on parade during the First World War.⁵¹

Conclusion

Moviegoing soon became thoroughly corporate and the business vertically integrated with national chains of theatres owned by Hollywood studios.⁵² Although none of the Famous Players Capitol palaces remains as a movie theatre today, some have been restored and are open as performing arts centres, such as the Capitol in Moose Jaw. With Cineplex Galaxy megaplexes in Saskatoon, Regina, Prince Albert, and Moose Jaw, national movie theatre chains clearly continue to stake out their claims of national reach with Saskatchewan links. Chain theatres have always been urban, and by now any movie theatre at all is largely reserved for the biggest cities. In 1897, itinerant showmen brought cinema to all of the Assiniboia Territory—not just Regina but also Saltcoats, Maple Creek, and at least ten other places. When the Saskatchewan Department of Labour was mandated to license all theatres and projectors in 1913, incomplete files list thirty-four towns with theatres.⁵³ By the time the 1932 *Film Daily*

51 Later Rossie films are noted in the *Regina Leader* in “Big Gathering of Ruthenian Pupils Wroxton,” June 22, 1914; “Interesting Pictures of Sewell Camp,” August 30, 1915; and “Pictures of Local Battalions Shown at Regina Theatre,” August 5, 1916. The last is almost surely Rossie’s only extant film, a copy archived as *Victory Loan Parade 1916* at Library and Archives Canada within the Richard Bird Fonds, 1973-0142.

52 Robert M. Seiler, “Movie Exhibition on the Prairies: The Case of the Allens, 1910–15,” *Prairie Forum* 31, 1 (2006): 71–84; Paul Moore and Philip Dombowsky, “Allen Theatre Enterprises and C. Howard Crane in Canada,” *Marquee: Journal of the Theatre Historical Society of America* 41, 3 (2009): 4–31. On Famous Players, see Paul S. Moore, “Nathan L. Nathanson Introduces Canadian Odeon: Producing National Competition in Film Exhibition,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 12, 2 (2003): 22–45.

53 “Correspondence re: Licensing Theatres and Exhibitions,” Department of Labour, Theatres and Public Halls Branch Series 2, Saskatchewan Archives Board. Towns with known theatres not included in the file are North Battleford, Battleford, Gull Lake, Biggar, Yorkton, Weyburn, and Swift Current.

Yearbook printed the first comprehensive list of movie theatres across Canada, just over 100 towns in Saskatchewan were listed. But there were already signs of decline, even before the advent of television, as nearly half were closed during this peak of the Great Depression. Only a few of them were chain theatres, and all of them were in the three biggest cities of Regina, Saskatoon, and Moose Jaw, just as those cities today are home to nearly all of the province's movie screens. The wax and wane of cinema and movie theatres across Saskatchewan in the twentieth century thus matched the economy and culture of the province itself—at some points a more even balance between rural and urban but with cities locally anchoring networks of mass culture and consumption.

The point is not that film took shape differently on the prairies but that media history itself takes a different shape when its arc is anchored in local events, because regulation, management, and promotion embed mass culture at the local level in everyday routines—an important point for much of the research collected in this volume.⁵⁴ Movies and mass entertainment filled the gap between local and global experience. Movie audiences gathered more or less simultaneously, but each in a particular place and time, aware that “everybody” elsewhere was seeing similar shows. Cinema showmen and their movie theatres filled the gap between film production and audiences, grounding mass-produced entertainment in local institutions. Showmen built their theatres in fixed points on the wide-open mass market of modern culture, situated spaces in communities but representing outside corporate interests. From the earliest prairie-based chain of Starland Theatres and Orpheum vaudeville to the latest Rainbow and Galaxy multiplexes, a Saskatchewan link in a Canadian movie theatre chain allows a company to claim national reach. This observation, however, obscures rather than illuminates how Saskatchewan links in national chains came to be experienced locally as engaging and fun places to gather. My review of Saskatchewan's early film business complements general overviews of Canadian media and communications by grounding the emergence of mass culture in a local context. In its broad strokes, the history of early cinema in Saskatchewan is similar to, rather than distinct, from the

54 See Robert M. Seiler and Tamara P. Seiler, *Reel Time: Movie Exhibitors and Movie Audiences in Prairie Canada, 1896 to 1986* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2013). For the general study of small-town showmanship, see Kathy Fuller-Seeley, ed., *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); and Gregory Waller, “Imagining and Promoting the Small-Town Theater,” *Cinema Journal* 44, 3 (2005): 3–19.

emergence of movies and theatres elsewhere; film technology and the film business worked to embed local cultures within transnational networks for mass consumption and popular culture. Nonetheless, this media history was continually anchored in local events by local people who championed mass entertainment as an everyday routine that connected the home to the world.