Early Cinema at Quaama and Cobargo Schools of Arts: A Preliminary Analysis of Film Selection, Distribution, Viewing Patterns and Community Cultural Themes.

By: Veronica M B Coen
Quaama Village.

For: Faculty of Arts Summer Research Project

University of Wollongong.

Quaama School of Arts, established 1902.
Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of the following people and organisations in researching this paper:

Sandra Florence and Penelope Davies – Bega Historical Society.

Librarians at the Bega Library, in particular, Joanne for her patience and enthusiasm.

Librarians and staff at the National Film and Sound Archive, including Jan Thurling, Marilyn Dooley and Patrick.

Andrew Pike for obtaining permission from Ross Cooper to view the notes for his MA thesis.

John Sewel from Moruya Historical Society for agreeing to allow me to view their closed collection.

Community members in Quaama and Cobargo for their interest, support and encouragement.

Local historian, Fiona Firth for advice and encouragement.

My daughter Nicki West and her partner Michael Thompson for accommodating me whilst conducting research in Canberra.

Kate Bowles (and Harper), for patience, clear advice and compassionate understanding.

Rebecca Albury for assistance with getting the application for this project in to the faculty.

Stephanie Hanson for sharing and exchanging research leads and notes.

Chris Dwyer and Ann Montague at Bega Education Centre for assistance with and loan of digital camera.

The Faculty of Arts, University of Wollongong for giving me the opportunity to begin my career in research!
Early Cinema at Quaama and Cobargo Schools of Arts: A Preliminary Analysis of Film Selection, Distribution, Viewing Patterns and Community Cultural Themes.

Introduction:

This research forms the background to a proposed Honours study which will evaluate the influence of films on the cultural development and community identity of residents of the districts of Quaama and Cobargo.

Quaama and Cobargo are small villages ten kilometers apart located in the north of the present Bega Valley Shire on the far south coast of New South Wales. The whole region has long been identified by locals as ‘the forgotten corner’. This definition provides an indication of the geographical, political and social remoteness experienced by regional residents. Given this, it is not unreasonable to speculate that the introduction of motion pictures to the communities may have impacted significantly on the shaping of community perceptions of the world in which they lived, and in turn reflectively influenced behaviours and self-perceptions.

Aims of Research:

The current study therefore has sought to identify the range of films circulated for exhibition at the Quaama and Cobargo Schools of Arts from the earliest exhibition dates and also the methods and styles of their promotion. It was also the intention for this study to make a thematic analysis of promotional literature in the local newspapers – the Cobargo Chronicle and The Bega Standard, with news and social columns to gain insight into the emerging cultural framework for the district. The evidence for this analysis has, however been found to be incomplete. The entire records for the Cobargo Chronicle for the years 1925 – 1929 are missing from both local and National Library of Australia archives.

The research has also aimed to draw from archival records the patterns of travelling picture showmen, mapping the routes of their tours, noting the exhibition venues used and any other available information pertaining to the broader early cinema projects currently being undertaken by researchers in this field. Extensive searching has revealed that such evidence is also scant in the archives.

A further important aim of this research is to build on local cultural heritage records. To date there is little recorded history of the village of Quaama either pre or post white settlement and certainly no documentation at all of the era of travelling picture-shows in the district. Apart from a brief undergraduate interview taken in 2004, this same situation applies to the Cobargo School of Arts. The preservation of cultural heritage is fundamental to building social capital and community cohesiveness whereby newcomers to the districts of Quaama and Cobargo may build a sense of local identity and belonging, aided by knowledges of the social and cultural history of the district.
Advertisement in *The Cobargo Chronicle* 7 April, 1930 urging viewers to “support your own town” by coming to the pictures at the Cobargo Theatre.
Methodology

With the objective in mind of documenting the pictures that were shown at the Cobargo and Quaama Schools of Arts from the earliest exhibition dates at these venues, it was planned to undertake an archival search of local newspapers, *The Cobargo Chronicle* and *The Bega Standard*. Accessing these early newspapers would require establishing a working relationship with the coordinators of the Bega Historical Society and librarians in charge of the local history collection at the Bega Valley Shire Library.

The methodology entailed identifying the films exhibited at the selected venues and documenting the methods employed for their promotion. The research would then take on a thematic analysis of advertisements, news and social articles adjacent to the picture advertisements in the newspapers to identify emergent cultural themes in the communities.

Further to this a search of archival sources was undertaken to identify the patterns of travelling picture shows, including their touring routes and schedules in order to contextualise the honours study in a broad regional framework.

Results of the research

Initial searches of the Bega Historical Society records for Cobargo, Quaama and Pictures and Theatres in the region produced scant records of the early picture shows for the whole of the Bega Valley with no documentation at all of pictures or other activities at the Quaama School of Arts and only a few notations about the pictures at Cobargo.

The Bega library has the only known existing original copies of *The Cobargo Chronicle*, but this collection is sadly incomplete there being no records for the years from 1925 – 1929. Microfilm collections at the Pambula Genealogical Society and the National Library of Australia are taken from the original collection held at Bega. The searches of this paper have thus covered:

- January 14 – March 25 1922
- January 19 – December 24 1924
- January 24 – June 20 1930 (the last date for 1930)
- January 23 – May 29 1931

Searches of *The Bega Standard* were undertaken to ascertain a time frame for the commencement of picture exhibition in the Bega region and for references to travelling showmen visiting Cobargo and/or Quaama. These papers have also broadened the general cultural perspective for the region during the period studied:

- 1 May – November 11 1902
• June 23 1903
• March 22 1904
• August - December 1910
• October – December 1911
• January 30 – February 20 1912

In addition to these, selected papers from the 1890s were analysed to provide historical context to the developing cultural themes for the district. These were:

• *The Cobargo Watch*, October 13 – November 17 1894
• *The Cobargo Chronicle*, volume 1, number 1, November 18 1898

**What the papers revealed**

The earliest mention of the picture show in Cobargo in the papers available for analysis was found in the *Bega Standard*, November 10 1910. The report under a general news subheading “Cobargo” stated “Check’s Moving Picture Show opened to a crowded house on Monday night, the principal picture being ‘The Coronation and Naval Review at Spit head’1. In a reporting style typical of the period, there was no further comment on the event.

Of the papers surveyed, the next reference to the ‘pictures’ was printed in *The Cobargo Chronicle* on January 19 1924, revealing that “Cobargo is about the only town on the Far South Coast which is carefully avoided by picture shows. Pictures do not seem to be a hobby of Cobargo people”. Yet, just weeks later on March 21 by “special arrangement” of the Show Society, the “expert operator”, Mr Arthur Preddey from Moruya brought his moving picture plant for the “entertainment of young and old”2. The advertisement in the Chronicle on March 1 encouraged readers to “Bring your kiddies along to see leading artists in modern plays and scenes in other parts of the world”3. A report in the ‘Local and General News’ section of the Chronicle on March 8 speculated that “The picture plant installed at the School of Arts may remain here under local purchase”4. Although reports in subsequent editions on March 15 and 22 confirm the success of the aforementioned picture show, it having been “…packed to the doors”, there is no further reporting of the subject notwithstanding the monthly School of Arts meeting report published on 22 March described discussion of the promotion of winter entertainment including a suggestion for roller skating5.

A semiotic reading of *The Cobargo Chronicle* over several months during the year 1924 indicates that citizens were concerned primarily with local economic development, in particular dairying – butter production and wattle-barking figures; and transport issues. The social calendar was filled with traditional locally focussed activities such as Balls

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2 *Cobargo Chronicle*, March 1, 1924.
3 Ibid.
4 *Cobargo Chronicle*, March 8, 1924.
5 *Cobargo Chronicle*, March 22, 1924.
and fundraisers in aid of local football clubs, ‘Diggers’ and Church funds. The Cobargo and Quaama Schools of Arts were reported as venues most weeks for such business and social activities with grand farewell functions also being prominent in the noted events. Thus, being quite socially self-sufficient, there appeared to be no pressing community need to introduce new forms of entertainment.

During this time however, the Chronicle made several reports of the Nimitybelle* community’s initiative to establish a picture show at their School of Arts. Reportedly, this decision demonstrating “a proper public spirit” was made “At a very large meeting” of its members. A Mr. John Jardine expressed determination to procure the best plant available and accepted guarantees for £310 to cover the installation6. Further a “sheep drive” organised by Reg Jardine in aid of the picture show returned £110/11/37 and on August 9 the Local and General News section of the Chronicle reported the opening of Nimmitabel’s* picture show8. By October 4 the Nimitybelle School of Arts picture show had taken £156/9/6 at the door, representing a clear profit (for the School of Arts) of £107/9/2.9

Ironically, during this period the Chronicle reported that little interest in the Cobargo School of Arts had resulted in the abandonment of a meeting due to lack of numbers10. Yet, in the same edition of the paper it was reported that “Quaama friends are organising a ball on a lavish scale…” whereby the newly installed “…Player Piano…costing the School of Arts £238…” would be used for the first time11. Moreover, a travelling picture show “…which projects pictures from inside a covered motor lorry to a screen run out from the back of the vehicle…”, the Chronicle said, had attracted a large audience into the street12! Perhaps the social cohesion in the Cobargo and Quaama districts, evidenced by regular events such as the “Grand Rose Ball in aid of Cobargo Convent Building Fund” and a “Plain and Fancy Dress Cinderella”, both advertised for the same time period13 - was such that the community had not yet felt the need for the innovation of picture entertainment.

No further mention of picture shows in Cobargo (or Quaama) appear in the papers in 1924, excepting a brief notation, “Preddey’s Pictures are again on tour for the summer and visited Narooma last night.”14 As there are no copies of the Chronicle for 1925, it is not possible to ascertain by archival evidence whether the towns were included in

*Note Nimitybelle and Nimmitabel are interchangeable spellings used in the newspapers.
6Cobargo Chronicle, June 14, 1924.
7Ibid, June 28, 1924.
8Ibid, August 9 1924.
9Ibid, October 4, 1924.
10Ibid, August 2, 1924.
11Ibid.
12Cobargo Chronicle, August 16, 1924.
*A “Cinderella” was a ball for children – popular throughout the early 20th Century at Quaama & Cobargo.
Preddey’s tour. There were however, advertisements for travelling vaudeville shows to visit both Cobargo and Quaama during this period\textsuperscript{15}.

The next period studied in detail includes available \textit{Chronicles} from January 24 – June 20 1930 and January 23 – May 29 1931. By this time a regular picture show was established at the Cobargo School of Arts and the weekly programme as advertised in the paper is listed in the table below. No mention of pictures at Quaama appears in these papers.

Although the picture show had become an established entertainment in Cobargo, traditional fundraising, social balls and musical events continued to feature strongly in community life. The picture show became integrated in these events. Such an occasion was the opening of the new sports ground ‘Narira Park’\textsuperscript{16}. Other entertainments included visiting vaudevillians, singers and musicians.

\textbf{Cobargo School of Arts est. 1885, Bermagui Road, Cobargo.} Photographed 25/02/06
The projection booth was located in the front section of the building (shown) above the door. It no longer exists.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Op.Cit.}, December 13 & December 24, 1924. \\
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{The Cobargo Chronicle}, January 24, 1930.
## Table of Pictures identified as shown at Cobargo to 1931

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exhibitor</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title of picture</th>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Checks Moving Picture Show</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>‘The Coronation and Naval Review at Spit Head’</td>
<td>Cobargo</td>
<td>Not stated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.H. Preddey of the Amusu Picture Theatre, Moruya.</td>
<td>1924</td>
<td>‘Stranger the Fiction’ ‘Golden Snare’</td>
<td>Cobargo School of Arts</td>
<td>First night of Show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travelling Show – off truck</td>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>Cobargo –street-</td>
<td>Promotion for picture firms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cobargo School of Arts</td>
<td>1928</td>
<td>‘Lost at the Front’ ‘Without Mercy’</td>
<td>School of Arts</td>
<td>Benefit for West Scholarship fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennelly, Manager Annetts, Operator.</td>
<td>1929</td>
<td>‘Mons’</td>
<td>SOA – Cobargo Picture Theatre</td>
<td>Empire Day Celebrations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macks Vaudeville Company</td>
<td>Jan 24</td>
<td>‘Getting Gertie’s Garter’</td>
<td>School of Arts</td>
<td>Part of Travelling Show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan 28 1930</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Regular show</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb 14 1930</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Regular show</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb 21 1930</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Regular show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 28 1930</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Regular show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mch 7 1930</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Showboat’</td>
<td>SOA - Cobargo Picture Theatre</td>
<td>Regular show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mch 14 1930</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Chicken a la King’ ‘Fleetwing’</td>
<td>SOA - Cobargo Picture Theatre</td>
<td>Regular show</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Kennelly     | Mch 21 1930 | ‘Square Crook’  
              | ‘Horseman of the Plains’ | SOA - Cobargo Picture Theatre | Regular show |
|--------------|-------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| Kennelly     | Mch 28 1930 | ‘The Cowboy Kid’  
              | ‘A Thief in the Dark’ | SOA - Cobargo Picture Theatre | Regular show |
| Kennelly - All Fox Programs | April 4 1930 | ‘Pyjamas’  
              | ‘A Woman Wise’ | SOA - Cobargo Picture Theatre | Regular show |
| Kennelly     | April 11 1930 | ‘The Great Well’  
              | ‘With Love and Hisses’ | SOA -Cobargo Picture Theatre | Regular show |
| Kennelly     | April 17 1930 | ‘Arizona Wildcat’ | SOA -Cobargo Picture Theatre | Regular show |
| Kennelly     | April 25 1930 | ‘A girl in Every Port’  
              | ‘Soft Living’ | SOA -Cobargo Picture Theatre | ANZAC Night “Ladies Must Dress” |
| Kennelly     | May 2 1930 | ‘A Woman Against the World’  
              | ‘The Rat’ | SOA -Cobargo Picture Theatre | Regular show |
| Kennelly     | May 9 1930 | ‘Rex the Devil Horse’ | Cobargo Pictures | Regular show |
| Kennelly     | May 16 1930 | ‘The Triumph of the Rat’  
              | ‘Loves of Carmen’ | SOA -Cobargo Picture Theatre | Regular show |
| Kennelly     | May 23 1930 | ‘No Other Woman’  
              | ‘East Side, West Side’ | SOA -Cobargo Picture Theatre | Regular show |
| Kennelly     | May 30 1930 | ‘None But the Brave’  
              | ‘The Branded Sombrero’ | SOA -Cobargo Picture Theatre | Regular show |
| Kennelly     | June 6 1930 | ‘Painted Post’  
              | ‘Gateway of the Moon’ | SOA -Cobargo Picture Theatre | Regular show |
| Kennelly     | June 13 1930 | ‘Four Sons’-(Won “Gold Medal Film of the Year”)  
              | ‘The Girl Shy Cowboy’ | SOA -Cobargo Picture Theatre | Regular show |
| Kennelly     | June 20 1930 | ‘Road House’  
<pre><code>          | ‘Black Jack’ | SOA -Cobargo Picture Theatre | Regular show |
</code></pre>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 27</td>
<td>‘The River Pirate’</td>
<td>SOA -Cobargo Picture Theatre</td>
<td>Regular show</td>
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<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>‘Two Girls Wanted’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan 23</td>
<td>‘Lady Be good’</td>
<td>School of Arts</td>
<td>Summer season show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>‘Speeding Venus’ also comedy, scenic and topical films.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan 30</td>
<td>‘Flying Romeo’</td>
<td>School of Arts</td>
<td>Summer season show</td>
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<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>‘Gigolo’</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb 13</td>
<td>‘White Gold’</td>
<td>School of Arts</td>
<td>Summer season show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>‘Love Never Dies’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb 20</td>
<td>‘Love &amp; the Devil’</td>
<td>School of Arts</td>
<td>Summer season show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>‘Rejuvenation of Aunt Mary’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 27</td>
<td>‘Getting Gertie’s Garter’</td>
<td>School of Arts</td>
<td>Summer season show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>‘The Outcast’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mch 6</td>
<td>‘Do Your Duty’</td>
<td>School of Arts</td>
<td>Regular show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>‘The Leopard Lady’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mch 13</td>
<td>‘Midnight Follies’</td>
<td>School of Arts First night of “The Show”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>‘Noah’s Ark’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mch 20</td>
<td>‘Wright Idea’</td>
<td>School of Arts</td>
<td>Regular show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>‘The Country Doctor’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mch 27</td>
<td>‘The Waterfront’</td>
<td>SOA-Cobargo Pictures</td>
<td>Regular show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>‘The American Beauty’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 4</td>
<td>‘Oh Kay’</td>
<td>SOA-Cobargo Pictures</td>
<td>“Farewell night” for the pictures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>‘Shepherd of the Hills’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gordon’s Talkies - SOA share in profit.</td>
<td>‘Broadway Scandal of 1930’</td>
<td>School of Arts First Talkie in Cobargo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 24</td>
<td>‘Wall Street’</td>
<td>School of Arts</td>
<td>Return visit of Talkies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>‘Mexicali Rose’</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Krazy Kat Kartoon’</td>
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</table>
The ‘Local & General News’ section of *The Cobargo Chronicle* presented a commentary on the patronage at the Cobargo Picture Theatre during 1930. These comments and variations in promotional language of Picture Show advertisements read in concert with other news suggest that the economic depression was a catalyst in the closure of the pictures at the end of June, 1930. The picture show management made consistent efforts to entice an audience –

- “…Prove that the Management is out to prove that the local entertainment is superior to anything travelling. It is our own show which keeps your money in the town”.\(^{17}\)
- “Cobargo Picture Theatre is consistently booking the *very best films*”.\(^{18}\)
- “The long special programs have been abandoned and patrons of the pictures express satisfaction at the shorter sessions, enabling then to get home at a reasonable hour. Prices of admission are now 2s and 1s”.\(^{19}\)
- “Mr. T. Kennelly said the patronage was so discouraging that if better results were not obtained there would be nothing else for it but to close the show down”.\(^{20}\)
- “REALISE IT – No Pictures Like Our Pictures
  We contract for the Best
  We show them the Best
  We show then the cheapest”.\(^{21}\)
- ‘The pictures on ANZAC Night did not attract a big house, and the “dance to follow” did not take place”.\(^{22}\)
- “Attendance at the pictures…disappointing…closing of the show appears inevitable. It is a pity such excellent entertainment becomes lost to the town, which possesses one of the best picture plants out of Sydney”.\(^{23}\)
- “…For several weeks the show had been a steady loser. The contract for the supply of films was booked to 30 June…it was obvious that the show would not carry on, and it would be closed down at the end of the contract. It was evident that the Cobargo public did not want pictures”.\(^{24}\)
- “Mr. Charlie Martin, who is a great favourite on the concert platform, will sing tonight that appealing song “Little Mother”. This song is singularly appropriate to the great and pathetic picture “Four Sons” which is the Gold Medal Film of the Year and which patrons of the local theatre will be favoured to witness tonight”.\(^{25}\)

17 *The Cobargo Chronicle*, February 21, 1930.
22 *Ibid*.
It appears that the picture plant was taken up by the management of the School of Arts sometime between the last *Chronicle* for 1930 available for this study - dated June 20, ten days before the expiration of Kennelly’s picture contract and the next available newspaper date of January 23, 1931. An advertisement reads, “…another sparkling program…” at the Cobargo Pictures run “…under the control and management of the committee of the School of Arts. The prices of admission were further reduced to 1/6 for adults and 6d for children. As the effects of the depression deepened in the district - “Some 22 families are now on the dole in Bombala. So far as the “Chronicle” is aware the dole system has not reached Cobargo”,26 the picture show was no longer financially viable and closed as a weekly entertainment on April 4, 1931.27

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A ‘letter to the editor’ “In an Envelope” – attempts to sum up the situation.
“Townsman” said, “The race club dead, the pictures dead, football apparently dead, and no wicket for cricket – what have we left? The fate of the pictures only bears out what Mr. Kennelly said over a year ago, ‘The people don’t want pictures’…There are lots of households in the town who are never represented at the pictures. Those who
live outside the town were fairly regular in their support. All the evidence is that Cobargo is slipping”.  

The School of Arts management negotiated with both of its picture suppliers, First Nationals and The Universal Co. for release from their contracts as they deemed there was little prospect of reviving public interest in silent pictures. In order to meet the remaining debt of £53 on the contracts, the committee decided to screen, about once per month, picture programs which had an “…appealing name…that would convey meaning familiar to the public”; the films “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” and “The Term of His Natural Life” were cited as examples of films that “had attracted big houses because people were familiar with the themes on which the pictures were based. The committee also intended to screen films which according to First National recommendation “Had earned high repute in metropolitan theatres”. A local contract for rental of the venue for roller skating was also secured and “Gordon’s Talkie Picture show” immediately stepped into the market, initially establishing regular monthly shows at Cobargo School of Arts.

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The Cobargo Chronicle, April 17, 1931.

28 Ibid.
29 The Southern Advertiser and Record, June 19, 1931.
30 Op. cit., May 1, 1931
31 Ibid, May 15, 1931.
Advertisements for Talkies at the Lyric Theatre in Bega also made their first appearance in the Chronicle at this time.\textsuperscript{32} The quality of the new Talkies was enthusiastically described – “the voices of the singers and actors were most distinct, travelling clearly all over the hall…the Talkies were a revelation”.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{32} Op. cit., May 1, 1931.
\textsuperscript{33} The Cobargo Chronicle, May 1, 1931.
Beyond the Newspaper Evidence - Quaama

None of newspapers examined (either the *Bega Standard* or *Cobargo Chronicle*) made any mention of the pictures at Quaama School of Arts, yet the existence of the projection booth behind the stage at the hall is material evidence of a once popular entertainment for the community. Restoration of the stage area of the hall was carried out in 1995 with the aperture to the projection box retained under instruction from the appointed heritage advisor. Suzannah Plowman’s 1994 conservation report states only that the projection room was added “Some years after original construction…”, this being 1902. Mrs. Betty Taylor’s 1997 local history document, *Dry River, Quaama: Our Schools, Our Heritage* provides further insights into the story of moving pictures at Quaama. She states that a travelling show regularly visited in the days of silent movies and in correspondence held in Quaama School of Arts’ records reveals her own mother was the piano player for the show! Mrs. Taylor’s documentation states that with the advent of Talkies, travelling shows frequented Quaama until well into the 1940s. Her brother, Eric was the ‘peanut boy’.

**Projection Room, Quaama School of Arts** Photographed 20 February 2006

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34 Plowman, (1994) *Quaama School of Arts Conservation Report*.
37 *Ibid*, Letter to the Secretary.
To date no evidence has emerged identifying which travelling shows visited Quaama. A brief undated paper entitled *Entertainment in the Bega Valley* by David Cross confirms that the Kings Theatre, Bega operated a travelling show for a short period – “The Southern Talkie Company”, but the activities of this company remain under researched.\(^\text{38}\) Ted Grime who operated a photographic studio in Bega in the 1930s also operated a travelling picture show, but apart from Candelo, his travelling routes also need further investigation.\(^\text{39}\) Mr. A Preddey from Moruya who brought his picture plant to Cobargo also may have travelled the extra few miles south to Quaama.

**Cobargo**

William A. Bayley’s documentation, held at The Bega Museum states that Moving Picture screening commenced in 1926 at Cobargo. However, Bayley’s notes may be inaccurate as they also state incorrectly that Talkies commenced in 1933, whereas this research has identified the first Talkies were shown in Cobargo in 1931. The local history booklet, *Memoires: Cobargo & District Schools 1871-1996* states the “Cobargo Picture Theatre” conducted a benefit show in November, 1928 for the West Scholarship

\(^{38}\) Cross (undated) *Entertainment in the Bega Valley.*

\(^{39}\) *Bega District News,* Dec 22, 1989, p.4.
Fund, suggesting when correlating this date with the closest recorded date of a visit by a travelling show at August 16, 1924 that Bayley’s date for commencement of the Cobargo pictures may be correct.\textsuperscript{40}

Local identity Reg O’Meara who was projectionist at the Cobargo Picture Theatre recalled in a ‘performance’ at the Cobargo Folk Festival, that the Friday night show was a full house every time. He said that the pictures that came from Sydney were of a “good clear quality” and although they operated twin projectors to avoid a break in the film, sometimes the pictures that came in 1000 foot spools were screened out of sequence!\textsuperscript{41}

A search of the trade paper \textit{Everyone’s} failed to reveal any specific information relating to Cobargo, Quaama or the Far South Coast. However, it did confirm that the predicament experienced by the Cobargo Picture Theatre in 1930-31 was commonly shared amongst country showmen who faced either purchasing sound equipment or losing patronage from local audiences\textsuperscript{42}. The trade paper also revealed that many travelling showmen covered vast territories with their picture plants.\textsuperscript{43} This fact could hold far-reaching implications for the social and cultural influences of the travelling showmen on the communities they visited in addition to considering the impact of the pictures they showed!

\textbf{Emergent Cultural Themes}

Throughout this research several matters have stood out. The \textit{Cobargo Chronicle} has consistently shown evidence of proud and patriotic local civic spirit and identity. This identification is particularly attached to the close locality, that is, of Cobargo district itself. The district of Bega was considered almost as a threat to Cobargo’s economic autonomy.\textsuperscript{44} Newspapers from the late nineteenth century and very early 1900s report many social outings amongst the British settler community that incorporated both a practical and social function. Wallaby drives and hare hunts followed by lavish picnics served both to clear the newly acquired farmlands of animals that would otherwise compete with their livestock for fodder, and to build community spirit.\textsuperscript{45}

As mentioned earlier, social and fund-raising dances were important events, attracting people from many centres across the district. However, there were factions in the community that held aspirations for an intellectually as well as agriculturally developed local society. The President of the Quaama School of Arts said at the opening of the institution in 1902, “…A great benefit is to be derived from an institution of this kind in a community, especially the younger members, as they can come in the evening to the reading room and educate and instruct themselves…and try to occupy the same position

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\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Everyone’s}, 14 May, 1930.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Ibid}, 14 May, 1930, October 21, 1936.
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Cobargo Watch}, November 3, 1894.
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Ibid}, November 14, 1894.
\end{flushleft}
as the late Sir Henry Parkes”. Also addressing the community at the opening ceremony, Mr. Parbery praised the sporting ability of “the young fellows from Quaama”, and proposed that the School of Arts could “fit them to take part in the intellectual world”.

Certainly, the dedication of the inaugural issue of the Cobargo Chronicle and South Coast Journal in 1889 to “…the interests of the Dairying, Mining and Agricultural industries…” speaks volumes of the predominant economic culture in the district. Leading from this position the district’s preoccupation with transportation, whether related to the development of road access throughout the broader region, steamer schedules or breeding stock for draught horses and later motor transport, reflected the remoteness and consequent vulnerability felt by early populations of the district.

A rather ironic twist on the acute awareness of the need for shared community enterprise emerges in the press as the spirit of capitalism under pressure from the effects of the depression emphasised individual possessiveness and meanness. This was illustrated repeatedly by brief cautionary advertisements such as, “Trespassers removing timber and rock from my property will be prosecuted”. Similarly, editorial comment that the travelling unemployed passing through Cobargo daily in “numbers” constituted a “burden…as the ‘bit of tucker’ to help them along the road has to be forthcoming”, demonstrated the insularity of district culture. As such, the community appeared very inwardly focussed with only a very small portion of the newspaper taken up with ‘telegraph news’, the majority of each issue covering local matters. The community was not entirely Eurocentric however, with regular advertisements appearing in the newspapers for Dr George On Lee and Dr George Lau On Lee, visiting Chinese Herbalists over many years.

There were also occasional references to Aboriginal people in the papers. These however, stand out for their infrequency and often reflect a negative or patronising attitude on the part of the writer. Although Betty Taylor documents the “Wallaga Lake aborigines” making a holiday of the Dry River Easter Monday Sports, having amongst them “…some of the fastest runners”, none of the many entries in the Chronicle about this famous and popular event made any mention of these Aboriginal athletes. Mrs. Taylor states, “…travelling on foot, horseback, sulkies and later on after their tribe obtained an old truck, [they] piled onto the back…camped on the flat across from the sports ground often staying a week…were very well behaved and allowed into the sports free of charge. A few of them had formed a gum-leaf band and would play several times during the day.” She said that in later years “…when alcohol began to be sneaked out to them, they became unruly and quarrelsome and eventually stopped attending in large groups”.

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46 Bega Standard, December 5, 1902.
47 The Cobargo Chronicle, Nov 18, 1898.
48 Ibid, January 24, 1930.
49 Ibid, May 9, 1930.
50 Ibid, June 14, 1924; Cobargo Watch, 20 October, 1894.
51 * Dry River was the former name for Quaama up until 1887.
Further, although football competitions between teams from Bega to Batemans Bay are regularly reported in the paper, they are strictly all-white teams. This is made explicit by publication of team member lists and specific separate references to the Wallaga Lake and Bateman’s Bay Aboriginal football teams. A match was reported thus, “Recently Batemans Bay darkies visited Wallaga Lake and played a football match with a dusky team from the aborigines station. The players very thoughtfully arranged to donate the proceeds of a collection to Bega District Hospital (italics added)”.

It is easy to wonder if the Aboriginal players might not have had use for the funds for their own charitable causes!

Further Research

It has become evident that the gaps in the archival records must be filled by recourse to oral history. Throughout the course of this research a list of potential interviewees has been compiled for the next phase of this locally based project. Further, Mrs. Betty Taylor’s research documents, held by her family since her death promise to hold more revelations and insights into the cultural characteristics of the district. Local networking has also led to the discovery of more editions of the Cobargo Chronicle which are currently held in private collection. It is hoped that access to these papers will be obtained so that the missing years may be studied.

Arrangements have been made for access to Moruya Historical Society to examine their records for evidence of travelling showmen who may have brought their picture plants to Cobargo and Quaama. Mr. Arthur Preddey was one showman exhibiting in Cobargo whose entrepreneurial ability led him to manage a sawmill at Moruya Heads amongst other things and the Jardine family (John, Harry and Reg) clearly left their cinematic ‘imprints’ in Nimmitabel as well as Bega, where they established the ‘Bega Picture Palace’. There is ample evidence to justify a separate study into the movements and characteristics of travelling showmen. This research has shown that there may be regional connections specific to travelling showmen and to the development of the cinema industry and its subsequent cultural influence where these ‘men’ (the brief review of editions of Everyone’s for this study has identified at least one show woman) took their shows. A list of existing oral histories relevant to this topic has been compiled from resources held at the National Film and Sound Archive for further study.

Finally, the importance of this field of research for the districts of Cobargo and Quaama has been confirmed. The dearth of existing historical documentation from any perspective is a glaring statement of validation. Neither locally produced history collections, nor trade papers and journals, or larger national cinema industry studies have explored the experiences of remote, rural communities in relation to the advent of the moving picture industry. It is hoped that the honours research will elucidate some of the questions relating to the influence of early cinema on cultural identity in these communities that even into the twenty first century remain relatively isolated from mainstream city cultures.

52 The Cobargo Chronicle, June 21, 1924.
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*Bega Standard*, December 5, 1902; November 10, 1910.

*The Cobargo Chronicle*, November 18, 1898.

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*The Cobargo Chronicle*, January 24, 1930; February 21, 1930; March 21, 1930; April 11, 1930; April 17, 1930; May 2, 1930; May 9, 1930; May 23, 1930; May 30, 1930; June 13, 1930.

*The Cobargo Chronicle*, February 20, 1931; April 2, 1931; May 1, 1931; May 15, 1931.


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