

## Early Film Nights in Albury

*Greg Ryan*

The first record of 'moving pictures' in Albury appears in the *Albury Banner* in January 1897. A series of twenty short films were screened at the Mechanics' Institute "the best of which were the approach of the railway train and the ballet dancing of Madame Rosa."

West's Pictures travelling film show started visiting Albury regularly from mid-1906 showing short films, often as part of a larger program including musicians, acrobats and magicians.

Early film goers had to sit on hard seats, sometimes just a plank supported at each end. They would then try to focus on shadowy, ill-lit screens with film shot on primitive equipment and tolerate frequent breakdowns of projection equipment. Subject material was very limited with no sound to accompany the images.

The first local open-air theatre, the Olympia Theatre, opened in December 1910, built between the Globe Hotel and the Albury Club in Kiewa Street by William Malcolm for West Pictures. The theatre provided for 1550 patrons. Elevated platforms at the eastern end provided 250 of the best seats costing 1/6. In front of the platforms were 650 seats costing 1/- and close to the screen a further 650 seats for sixpence each. The screen was about 9 x 9 metres.



In the mid-1920s, a new open-air theatre opened at the back of the Theatre Royal in Kiewa Street. It became known as the Royal Garden Theatre.

Films in 1910 were all quite short. The main feature on Olympia's opening night was "a stirring portrayal of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" supported by a further eight films.

James Scanlan, of the Albury plumbing firm, started the Empire Picture Company in 1910. The company had to provide their own electric generator and film projector. They screened films most weeks at Albury's Mechanics' Theatre and Wodonga Shire Hall. An early film night by the company featured the "most notable pictures, *The Warrnambool to Melbourne Road Race*, and *A Drop of Water, a scientific study*."

Scanlan caused quite a sensation in 1911 when he engaged “a young lady” to walk across the stage in a harem costume. The *Border Morning Mail* assured readers that “owing to great difficulty in persuading the wearer to don the harem skirt her name would not be divulged, and she wore a mask.”

In late 1911 Scanlan secured approval from Council to construct an open-air theatre in Market Square (now QEII Square). The theatre provided seating for 350 patrons though over 650 purchased tickets for their first screening in January 1912 for “No fewer than three splendid ‘star’ films, namely, *Life on the Border*, *At the Break of Dawn*, and *The Ruling Passion*.”