

# HISTORICAL NOTES

by Gary Evans

## THE FIRST FILMS IN CANADA

1896 was the year of the first film show in Canada. However, there are two conflicting claims as to when the first exhibition actually occurred. Ottawa used the Edison kinetoscope and films, Montreal, the Lumière brothers' machine and films.

The first claim, which seems to have gained acceptance among many English speaking film buffs (see Kirwan Cox and Donald Brittain's *Dreamland*) was by Jack Green, magician, whose Ottawa show occurred in June, 1896 on an Edison kinetoscope, imported from New York City. Green's own magic show was followed by four 50 foot 'loops' or films fastened end to end, to which he gave a running commentary. Green wrote a letter in 1944, recounting arrangements for the screening of the first motion pictures in Canada:

"... In June, 1896 was with Dr. Baily, a medicine show playing along the Ottawa River, was reading the Ottawa *Free Press* about June 2 or 3, 1896 and read where O'Hearn and Soper of the Ottawa Street Railway Company were going to bring to Ottawa Tom Edison's marvellous invention - pictures that move, also that only one other machine was in operation at that time in New York.

"So I lost no time in writing O'Hearn and Soper and got an engagement for two weeks. I did a 30 minute magic show and described the four pictures on the screen, all 50-foot films, all fastened together at the end like a belt, so they just kept repeating as long as the machine was in operation. First four films - four colored boys eating watermelon. Black Diamond Express running 80 miles an hour, the New York Central Railway, a betting scene at Atlantic City, and La Loie Fuller doing the Butterfly Dance, Governor General's Foot Guards Band furnished the music..."

*Gary Evans has written a history of government-sponsored film propaganda in Canada and Britain, The War For Men's Minds, to be published late in 1976.*

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The second claim was by Leo Ernest Ouimet, who said he remembered a series of Lumière films exhibited in Montreal before Jack Green's June exhibit. He recalled that two men, August Guay and André Vermette came from Paris with the Lumière-made films and machine and set up a show on a vacant lot on St. Lawrence Main, between Vitré and Lagachetière.

According to Ouimet, "It was installed in a shooting gallery space about seven feet wide and fifteen feet long, and the charge was five cents for standing." The program lasted about seven minutes and the men chose their film from 20-25 subjects, each 65-125 feet in length.

Green's show lasted two weeks. He sensed the future of film as an entertainment medium and with a flare for showmanship, became shortly thereafter, "Green - The Moving Picture King of Canada - Presenting the Highest Conception in Moving Picture Art."

The Montreal show of Lumière

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films allegedly closed after some 50 performances. Ouimet, however, was more the businessman than was Green. He would open Montreal's first successful cinema in 1900 and within a few years, was one of North America's wealthiest exhibitors of film entertainment.\* The Ouimetscope is still remembered, while Jack Green, magician, (whose profession was closer to the art of film than Ouimet's) remains an almost unknown personage.

Perhaps after all, it is not important to establish historical firsts, for in terms of the film industry and film commerce, it was Edison's company which established itself firmly in the new North American market and attained a position of pre-dominance, including a leading position in the infant newsreel industry.

*(Quoted information from the archives of Centre de documentation cinématographique, Bibliothèque Nationale, Montréal)*

\* See *Cinema Canada*, Historical notes, issues nos. 22 and 24. Ed.