

Vancouver, B. C., Started with "Hale's Tours" in 1905

Humble Beginning of J. D. Williams Has Developed to a Business of Considerable Proportions--Some Beautiful Picture Theaters.

THE dawn of the moving picture in British Columbia was much the same as in other parts of the continent, and occasioned the same wonder among those of the inhabitants who were sufficiently curious to pay real money for the privilege of looking upon something which they had never seen before. The first Vancouver entertainment in which films played a part was established on Cordova street in the year 1905, by J. D. Williams, now a leading Australian vaudeville and moving picture magnate, who installed one of the "Hale's Tours," which made their appearance at about that time, and consisted of an imitation railroad passenger coach in which the enchanted patrons sat in regulation car seats, and with eyes and mouths wide open, gazed fixedly at a sheet hung at the forward end. On this were projected scenes taken from the moving trains or street cars, and the effect of actual locomotion was heightened by the activities of a busy attendant who stood outside and joggled the structure at frequent intervals.



James D. Williams.

There was a noticeable tendency on the part of those seated down in front to arise and shout warnings to careless pedestrians who were apparently about to be run down by the cameraman, and they still tell a good story of one depraved individual who became a steady patron in the hope of being present when some such exciting accident should occur, or perhaps even when the well-known Mr. Hale's tour should be brought to a thrilling close through one of those collisions which always seemed to be on the point of happening.

Run in connection with a Mutoscope arcade, the car show was a financial success from the start, and for a time enjoyed a monopoly of the business. Before long, however, small store shows began to make their appearance. Bears & Tripp opened the old Bijou, and the Crystal was started by Mr. Williams. This is the oldest house in town still running, and is now giving six or seven reels for 2½ cents, each purchaser of a ticket at five cents being given a coupon good for a second admission within the week following.

A month later the Royal theater was opened by J. R. Muir, now the president of the Dominion Theater Company, Ltd., and the earliest pioneer among the present-day exhibitors of the city. The Royal, which later was re-named the Rose, was fitted up with four hundred kitchen chairs, and gave programs of from two to three reels, consisting principally of Kleine pictures, for which Mr. Muir had the agency, and some Pathe subjects, which were controlled in this territory by J. A. Schuberg, now a leading Winnipeg exhibitor. The praises of the show were sung continually by a paunchy individual who went to such particular pains to assure passersby that they were just in time to see the entire performance that he eventually came to be known as "Old 'Just in Time,'" and his proper name was lost sight of. This was probably intended in the scheme of things, however, as Mr. Muir is unable to recall anything else in regard to him that was at all proper.

The Star theater on Main street and the Elite on Cordova street were opened about this time, and a little later on, in 1907, J. R. Muir made a considerable advance over anything else established up to that time when he built the Maple Leaf theater on the site of the present Maple Leaf, but occupying a smaller plot of ground. This was the first local moving picture show housed in a building put up for that purpose, and although kitchen chairs still were used in lieu of something better the house was a marked improvement over its predecessors and had a seating capacity of five hundred.

Practically all houses featured illustrated songs at this time, and J. M. Robertson, then the singer at the Maple Leaf and now manager of the Dominion theater in Victoria, was one of the leading entertainers in this line.

In the year following the erection of the Maple Leaf Mr. Muir, in association with J. H. Quan, opened the Majestic, which was the first Vancouver film theater equipped with opera chairs, and gave the natives something to talk about. For some time Mr. Muir retained his interests in the three houses which he had established, and the business done was very heavy. Later he sold out to his partner, Mr. Quan, but continued to manage the houses until Mr. Quan in turn disposed of his interests to William Brown.



J. R. Muir.
Manager Dominion Theater,



W. P. Dewees.
Manager Rex Theater, Van-
couver, B. C.

670, while after seven months in the Royal Mr. Dewees opened the Princess, which marked a still further advance in the type of houses devoted to moving pictures. Independent service was used here, and the Princess developed into one of the most phenomenal money-makers in this section, playing to capacity houses nightly for a long period, and only letting down when other houses increased so rapidly that competition became an important factor in the situation.

In 1909 Douglas Creighton organized the National Amusement Company, and the National theater was erected. During this and the succeeding years a very large business was done with programs comprising pictures and small-time vaudeville at ten cents admission.

W. P. Nichols, the present general manager of the National Amusement Company, also entered the local field at about

Directly following the opening of the Majestic, W. P. Dewees, the present head of the Rex Theater Company, opened his first local house, called the Royal—the second Vancouver theater to bear that name, and situated on Hastings street, near Abbott. Seating capacity here was 240, and films were secured from the old Kinetograph company and from Pathe. Two reels were shown for ten cents and an orchestra was sometimes engaged for special occasions, although a piano usually furnished what music was required.

Mr. Muir now spent \$15,000 in remodeling the Maple Leaf, putting in opera chairs and increasing the capacity of the house to

this time through the purchase of the Bijou theater on Carrall street, but did not enter the National Amusement Company until early in 1914, when he secured the controlling interest and became managing director. In the meantime, however, both Mr. Nichols and Mr. Creighton had secured additional houses in other cities—the former, in North Vancouver, Victoria and Nanaimo, and the latter, houses in Victoria and Nanaimo.

Contemporaneous with the National and Bijou several new store shows sprang up, and many of them soon disappeared. The Savoy and the Province on Hastings street and the Granville on Granville street were in this class,



Rex Theater, Vancouver, B. C.



James Pilling.
Manager Orpheum Theater, Van-
couver, B. C.

and several of the earlier houses also dropped out of existence.

Late in the year 1912 J. R. Muir gave Vancouver its first pretentious photoplay house, when he opened the Dominion theater. It is owned by the Dominion Theater Company, Ltd., of which Mr. Muir is president, as well as being the active manager of the house. The Dominion is a beautiful brick and reinforced concrete theater costing in the neighborhood of \$70,000, and occupying a position on the edge of the business district, well toward the fashionable West End.

The Rex theater at 25 Hastings street West is owned by the Rex Amusement Company, Ltd., and W. P. Dewees, managing director, is in control of the house and its policy. This theater is the finest yet built in western Canada for the exhibition of moving pictures, and represents the personal ideas of Mr. Dewees as to what a modern photoplay theater



Dominion Theater, Vancouver, B. C.

should be. Throughout the construction of the building he exercised the functions of a supervising architect, and the result is an imposing tribute to his ability in this direction. The Rex is the newest of the Vancouver houses, having been completed in the fall of 1913 at a cost of \$130,000, and the entire arrangement of the house, as well as the quality of its appointments could hardly be improved upon. Mr. Dewees is managing director of the National Film Service, distributors of the Triangle program in western Canada.

Following the opening of the Dominion the next of the fine downtown houses was the Kinemacolor, or as



Hector Quagliotti.
Manager Colonial Theater, Van-
couver, B. C.

it is now known, the Colonial. This theater was financed by a group of local capitalists and, as indicated by its name, was the home of the colored pictures; but after a period of six months a demand for dramatic interest in the films forced the elimination of Kinemacolor, and black and white subjects were gradually substituted. At the end of a year, however, the promoters had lost \$92,000, and Hector Quagliotti assumed the management of the house, purchasing the equipment at auction. Under the new management the Colonial became an almost immediate success, and has always kept among the leaders in point of attendance.

At about this time the Columbia theater was built by the National Amusement Company, and became the stand of the shows which had formerly played the National.

The Orpheum theater, the local house of the Meyerfeld & Beck interests, but for the past year devoted to moving pictures, is a magnificent theater with a location second to none and a seating capacity of 1,700, which is considerably in excess of that of any other Vancouver house. The manager is James Pilling, former member of the Bostonians, actor, authority on hokum, past manager of a score of theaters, and a thorough showman with a record of twenty-five years in the amusement business. The Orpheum was erected two years ago on the site of the old Vancouver Opera House,

and is one of the very finest theaters in western Canada.

The Globe, now controlled by the National Amusement Company, was at one time under the management of S. B. Taube, who at the same time handled the distribution of the Famous Players product in British Columbia and is now manager of the Universal office in Montreal. The Globe is now in charge of Douglas Creighton and seats about 850.

As regards the future in Vancouver, exhibitors generally are agreed that a readjustment involving the elimination of some of the smaller houses is the only immediate solution of a problem that is becoming increasingly serious. Many thousands of men have left Vancouver for participation in the war, and the families of many of these have proceeded to England to be nearer to their soldiers who are either completing their training in that country, or have gone across to France. The serious financial depression which began here before the war has also been a factor in causing many others to leave the city, so that Vancouver has probably equalled, if not exceeded, the Government's estimate of a 25 per cent. decrease in the population of the province within the past two years. During this period not more than one or two small houses have closed, so that the patronage of theaters is spread out considerably thinner than formerly.

E. C. THOMAS.