

## CHAPTER ONE (Written in about 1952 by Julien Caunter)

The beginnings of an industry: 1895 onwards.

There was once a time when such things as cinemas and film studios had not been invented. That is going back a bit, before your time, to the end of the last century.

By 1895 a number of Inventors such as William Friese-Green had found a way to make and show moving pictures. The results were crude but the principle had been established, using instead of paper or glass a newly invented transparent flexible strip called celluloid to carry the photographic images.

Edison's laboratory was responsible for settling on 35mm as the width of the celluloid film to be used in his coin-in-the-slot peepshow machine which he called the kinetoscope, shown successfully as early as 1893.

The disadvantage of the kinetoscope was that it allowed only one person at a time to watch the movements so it inspired others to design projectors that would give large pictures as with a magic lantern for viewing by the many. Edison's film width of 35mm persuaded others to use the same gauge and it has been used in the Trade ever since.

It was on 28th December 1895 that the Lumiere brothers succeeded in giving the first public exhibition of films for which the patrons had to pay, at the Grand Cafe in Paris. They called their projector the cinematographe. The films were 35mm wide but had only one circular perforation at each side of an image instead of the four barrel-shaped perforations designed by Edison.

On 14th January 1896 Birt Acres gave his first demonstration to the Royal Photographic Society. He showed films he had taken during 1895 of various events like the Derby and the Boat Race.

On 20th February the Lumiere programme was shown in London at the Regent Polytechnic and from the following month the films were shown nightly at the Empire Theatre, Leicester Square for over a year.

Also on 20th February R.W.Paul demonstrated his Theatrograph at the Finsbury Technical College. then at the Royal Institute on the 8th March and Immediately afterwards in a little side show at Olympia where he projected on to the back of a translucent screen; the films were some made by Edison for the kinetoscope. On 25th March he gave his first exhibition to the paying public at the Alhambra music-hall, Leicester Square, again by back-projection from a cubby hole right at the back of the stage. The show was so successful that he continued with nightly performances for several years. His was the first public showing in England of films using Edison's eight perforations instead of Lumiere's two.

The influence on my family of the new-fangled animated photographs or cinematography started in 1896 with my great uncle Jim (James Henry Gee). Up to 1896 he was a violinist in Johannesburg, South Africa where he met a conjuror who owned a machine that lit up living pictures inside a box with a glass window. It represented one of the first feeble attempts in the direction of movies but nevertheless in those far off days Uncle Jim's interest was captured by the novelty.

While in South Africa he gathered a good deal of money (honestly, I assume) so he returned to England and in March 1896 he happened to be in London with his brother Henry and Henry's son Alfred. They attended the new show at the Alhambra where they were enthralled by seeing R.W.Paul's animated pictures projected on to a large white screen in the hall full of people. It was very different from looking into a box; those pictures of realistic life on a large screen were something entirely new.

Uncle Jim was enthusiastic at once and as he had money to spare he bought one of Paul's projectors with the intention of becoming a travelling showman. He also bought a set of the films to go with it.

The first thing he did was to take it all home to Hanley Staffordshire, fix a sheet up on the wall of the front room and give a demonstration to the family. Nobody was allowed to move about during the show because of the film: as it passed through the machine it dropped and coiled itself about on the floor, and stayed there until it had been wound up again. However, at the end the showing was voted success; the family was really amazed by the new scientific wonder. Then came Uncle Jim's first money-catching show to the local inhabitants, at the Victoria Hall, Hanley as recorded in the Staffordshire Sentinel (now the Evening Sentinel).

The primitive apparatus was a big clumsy machine that had to be turned by hand. The mechanism incorporated two Maltese crosses which moved the film intermittently through the 'gate' which was so called because it closed like a gate, with spring tension to hold the film steady as the light from the lantern shone through it.

Loading the film into that was not as simple as with later machines. Also, being an early design there was no feed sprocket to ease the film down into the gate; the roll merely hung on a plain spindle just above the gate and each time that the film was jerked through at the rate of 16 images or 'frames' per second, the roll on the spindle jumped about and it had to be watched to see that it did not jump off altogether and tear.

The machine therefore needed two persons to work it properly so brother Henry was called on to assist.

Even at a public showing the film was still allowed to gather on the floor, until eventually someone was clever enough to think of putting a box or basket there to catch it. Anyway, the audience watched with intense astonishment and enthusiasm the photographs of people behaving in such a life-like manner, something they would not have believed possible. They saw another world up there on the wall. The show was so popular that it continued there for several months.

The condition of the films in those days was not always good. They easily became scratched and dirty, for no one considered handling them carefully during developing, printing and projecting, so the effect was often of rain - it rained everywhere, even in a sunlit scene and under cover. That puzzled the audiences.

However, people were not critical at that time. They were satisfied if only anything moved about. The contents of each film were very simple. It could for instance show a blacksmith taking a piece of red hot iron out of the fire and putting it into a bucket of water so that the steam rose - that was all, yet it would cause a ripple of excitement. Then again: a street scene with Big Ben in the background showing people walking about and traffic crowding to-and-

fro, no more than that, but the folks in the audience would jostle about on their seats so as not to miss anything.

Most of the films were only 50 feet long because that was about the maximum length that could be jerked through a machine without tearing. 50 feet lasted less than one minute but nobody complained; they didn't know any different and they were so absorbed in what they were seeing that there was no thought of being critical.

At the end of the Victoria Hall run the two projectionists went out on tour, giving shows in Variety and Music Halls, not as a separate performance but squeezed into the normal programmes usually twice nightly. Film shows at that time were only a minor part of an evening's entertainment, a titbit added to the show as a novelty to attract a few more customers.

However, although they were doing well Henry soon decided that he had had enough of being away from home, especially as his own skilled work was at the potter's wheel. Therefore he persuaded his 18-year-old son Alfred to take his place and learn the new business. Alfred was four years younger than Cecil Hepworth, one of the real British pioneers.

Up to then Alfred had been running a porcelain factory making small articles for such things as electric fittings and mouthpieces for babies' feeding bottles. *"You know, there is the long rubber tube between the bottle and the mouth and when the milk comes up that it comes to the porcelain piece. Usually they were made of wood; then the Germans sent some over made of porcelain they were cleaner - so we copied them."*

It was the 2nd November 1896 when Alfred abandoned his trade and became a projectionist. He soon learned what there was to know, then he and Uncle Jim continued the touring, starting at the Lyceum Theatre, Blackburn as shown by the handwritten contract of 12th November illustrated here, which may be the earliest surviving document concerned with actual professional showing. From the phrasing of that contract you can tell what sort of troubles the manager was anxious to protect himself against and what the general standard of projectors and films must have been.

As Alfred soon discovered, Uncle Jim was slow, his great characteristic being that enthusiasm didn't last long. 'He was getting tired of lumping equipment around. He didn't mind the money but the work was too hard. However, Alfred continued to assist him. The conditions of working in those days were very different from today's. The machine was usually set up in the middle of the audience, without any protection. It was warm work. The resistance which stood near the apparatus, when there was electricity provided to work the arc lamp in the lantern, threw out a great heat which the public also felt. Sometimes the resistance was on the balcony, out of the way, which meant that sometimes things were livened up during the shows by a client sitting on the resistance in the dark!

If they managed to be in a protective little house made of a light wooden framework covered with canvas they didn't have it so good either. People used to rock it as they squeezed past or they pushed their elbows through the canvas. Remarks from the audience around were readily forthcoming whenever there was a little accident or if the intervals seemed too long: "Keep your whiskers out of the machine!" or "Get a monkey to work it for you!" - there were always some bright sparks around. Some were humorous enough to spit over the top of the

framework, for there was no roof. It was usual to receive orange peel and banana skins. Those intervals which caused the ribaldry were not long but there had to be one every time a film was changed as the programme was in seven or eight parts, each playing nearly a minute.

However, Alfred had his amusing moments also. He smiled at the audiences' reactions to some of the scenes. For example, waves on the seashore sweeping up to the camera made people cry out and lift their feet off the floor to keep the sea out of their boots; a hose pipe squirting towards the camera made them scream and duck down to avoid a soaking; a train entering a station towards them made them apprehensive until it had stopped moving and was no longer a danger.

The two showmen travelled with a circus for a while. At those times a sheet was hung in the middle of the ring and wetted to carry the light through to make the picture clearer on the other side. For some of the audience saw the front and the rest saw the back. Those who saw the reversed picture didn't seem to notice.

Life was hectic while they were in the circus. It kept them on their toes. The programme of films was the last item of the day and because the circus travelled about, as soon as the last customer had departed the tent would be dropped around our two showmen who had to be quick to wind up their films and get out before they were smothered.

Again in 1897 they were due to give a show at a place on the outskirts of Liverpool where there was no electricity. Just before the first show of the evening the regulator on the lime-light cylinder blew off so Alfred could not use the oxygen and he was stuck, for there was only that one cylinder. Uncle Jim was absent somewhere of course. Alfred walked out of the theatre saying he would be back in a few minutes. He went into town on the bus and begged a cylinder from another show. That cylinder was not a fresh one and there were great doubts about whether it had anything in it at all but he took the risk and was lucky enough to complete the second house.

Later in the year Alfred noticed that there were some well advertised shows run by a Mr. Thomas whose posters were brightly coloured and well spread about in the towns and Alfred found that the man took the trouble to have a cameraman take a film of any large gathering of local people such as workers coming out of a factory and the posters would invite them to come and see themselves in the show. He was certainly a live character, quite different from poor old Uncle Jim who didn't have that kind of drive at anything.

Well, Alfred wanted more action than he was getting and when he heard that Mr. Thomas wanted more projectionists he went to see him in Liverpool. Mr. Thomas hired him right away because of his experience. The wages were £2.15.0 per week. Alfred was not sure whether Uncle Jim was glad or sorry about it but Jim didn't do any more showing, he couldn't work alone.

Mr. A.D. Thomas or Edison-Thomas as he liked to be called used the Edison model. Alfred was pleased to note that it had only one Maltese cross so it was easier to work than Paul's Theatrograph; but it was still primitive apparatus and showing films had to be a watchful business, for the photographic material itself was extremely inflammable as Alfred was to find out before much longer. Over the years celluloid was to be responsible for a number of disastrous fires with a tragic loss of life; and strange to relate it wasn't usually the film fire

that did so much damage, it was the panic of the audience to get out through the narrow exits, especially down stairways where it only needed one person to fall and the people behind fell over the body in a heap and the great pressure from the mass at the back caused those trapped in front to be trampled to death or suffocated. It was a horrible business.

Mr. Thomas was a good man to work for. He first sent Alfred to Liverpool, to the Tivoli and other halls. From there to Southport and Chester. then to Cardiff for the Christmas season 1897. It was at Cardiff that Alfred had his most serious accident, while showing a series of short films in the interval at the Pantomime, with his projector in the centre aisle.

The first one went through all right and the 50ft strip had dropped into the tea-chest he had placed on the floor in front of the machine to keep the films from being stepped on. His intention was to run all into the chest so that afterwards he could more conveniently rewind them in one go instead of wasting time rewinding between films. When he had loaded the next strip he opened the lantern door to attend to the arc-light, when a piece of red-hot carbon fell off and bounced into the chest. A mighty flame roared into the air and lit up the whole place, with a strong smell of burning. Great screams of alarm from the audience and many jumped out of their seats.

By that time Alfred had moved rapidly and tipped the chest upside down in the aisle to smother the flames. As quickly as possible he struck up the arc and started turning the handle the picture appeared on the screen as though nothing was wrong fortunately the uproar that had started died down and although the fumes still hung around the people did return to their seats.

The man who owned the theatre and had put up the Pantomime felt like a wet rag and sank into a chair too weak to move, with pearls of sweat on his brow. He had put all the money he owned into that show and the accident of the film's burning could easily have caused a great panic and cleared the place out - he would have been ruined.

At the end of the run Alfred returned to headquarters in Liverpool (minus the one film) and ready for the next booking. The work was not continuous. there were gaps and during one gap at the beginning of 1898 he was in London where he had the honour of meeting Robert W. Paul as a fellow showman; so he got to know him personally although he did not work with him, except for one occasion when Paul was taking a re-enacted scene of the accident at the launching of HMS Albion.

Paul's catalogue of 1898 lists the item:

DISASTER. The launching of HMS Albion, followed by the scene of the rescuing of the persons submerged in the water by the collapse of the staging. The only view of this terrible and affecting scene taken. - 40 feet.

At last after more than eighty years we learn more about that affecting scene. Paul had photographed the launching but missed the actual collapse of the spectators' wooden platform, so immediately afterwards he went down to the Thames at Richmond Bridge to film an extra scene and Alfred went along with several other people.

Alfred remembers: "*Between us we tipped some planks into the water to float past the camera, some volunteers tumbled themselves in including one boy with woman's clothes on*

*and we pulled them all to safety. They wanted me to jump in as one of the girls but I said No I'd rather pull them out".*

Alfred never got as far as Blackpool but he could see the famous Big Wheel from Southport where he was sent at the end of March 1898 to show at the commencement of the Circus owned by the Wirth Brothers from Australia. In that situation he was fixed up in the gangway between the seats with no framework of any kind around the projector. A number of times people passing to their seats knocked the handle of the driving wheel out of his hand. He used the wet screen method in that circus, as before. That engagement lasted for eleven weeks, until mid-June.

When he got back to base he found that Mr. Thomas had moved to London so Alfred followed and then gave shows for him at the Holborn Variety and the East End Empire.

The choice of films for exhibition was increasing rapidly; there was no shortage of subjects for the cameramen to record: not only railway trains and street scenes but horse races, processions, crowds on Hampstead Heath, dancing on the village green, someone eating hokey-pokey (the early ice cream), a juggler or conjuror, steamers on the Thames and even little Variety turns - anything that moved made a Living Picture. Travelling showmen were not often forced to buy fresh films because, with moving from place to place, they could keep showing the same ones for quite a long time with one or two in reserve for emergency. In July 1898 came the big change for Alfred. On the 6th Mr. Thomas sent him to the Continent to continue showing there using the same Edison projector. With him also was Thomas's man Mr. Roberts who spoke the European languages, for Alfred spoke only English.

First to Berlin at the Winter Gardens in their closed season. From there to Ronarker's in Vienna, then Breslau and Hanover and back to Berlin. They stopped in each town for a few days to give a show and try for a contract to stay longer.

Next it was Brussels and there something happened: an elderly man came from the audience to see the showmen; he spoke English and said he was Direktor Rasmussen who ran the Cirkus Variete in Copenhagen. He liked their Living Pictures and asked if they would be able to give a show in his theatre. They said of course, when they had fulfilled the Antwerp booking. He said he would let them know after he returned to Denmark.

They showed in Antwerp and by the end of the engagement no word had come from Rasmussen. It was not until they had the tickets in their pockets ready for the 10.15 train to Paris that the message came: they were wanted in Copenhagen for September 23rd.

It was Alfred's first visit to Denmark's capital and he felt at home there in the first five minutes. It was such a 'comfortable' city, that's the best way he could describe it. The Cirkus Variete in Jernbanegade (Railway Street) was a famous place of entertainment that had a circus during the summer months and changed to Variety in winter.

He was the first travelling showman to visit Copenhagen and demonstrate the new wonder. The films were placed as the big number in the middle of the programme instead of as hitherto in Variety always being the last. Films of the war between the Americans and the Spanish islands of Cuba and the Philippines had started coming through not long before, so the first programme contained some of them.

The Cirkus Journal wrote: "*Our friend Mr.Gee's movable pictures have caused a sensation. He has aroused great interest with his up-to-date presentation and as the first scenes are from the Spanish-American war the phenomenon has been christened Wargraphs and they receive much praise*".

The showing of those Wargraphs was really a revolutionary event. Up to then wars were things that people only read about, or they saw an illustration or two in the newspapers, but at last audiences could see a modern war going on and they could see it in movement, the fighting actually happening, and it brought home to them what was involved when the men of one country tried to kill the men of another. It really shook them up.

Of course, there were other types of films in the programmes but viewed in the light of later years it was not very sensational stuff that Alfred showed to Copenhagen. The films were still under a minute each and had no titles, so before each film Mr.Roberts spoke aloud, for example like this: "Next comes a further despatch from the Spanish-American war. You will see the American squadron attacking the Spanish West Indies squadron". That name Wargraph became attached to the projector as well as the films, especially as the next two years brought scenes from another war, in South Africa, the Boers against the British.

The season finished at the end of April 1899. Alfred had to finish in April anyway because it happened that Mr.Thomas's firm was in trouble and recalled all its operators. It was then that Mr.Roberts grasped the opportunity to buy from Thomas the Wargraph Alfred had been using and he went up to Stockholm. Alfred went with him, for five months in the summer. When that season finished Roberts went away with the machine and Alfred was left on his own.

He could only think of going home to England. On the way he stopped off at Copenhagen because he liked the place so much. He had no means of giving a show and no money to do anything about it but an idea came to him: he went and saw old Mr. Rasmussen and asked him "Isn't it time you had your own Living Pictures?" "Yes, I think you are right. Come into the office and make a contract." So Alfred was engaged to start at the beginning of November.

He let a few days go by and then asked for an advance for the projector. Rasmussen was a little surprised: "You mean you haven't got a machine?" - but he just laughed and gave the advance.

When that money had been sent to New York for an Edison machine Alfred still had to buy films, there were none for hire, so more capital was needed. The cost was one krone a metre, that is a shilling (5 new pence) English money, buying them from Paul or any of the others..

He waited another few days and then asked for an advance for the films. Rasmussen said "Haven't you got any films either?" but he gave the advance and was quite nice about it in spite of lending 2,000 kroner, about £100.

In that way, Alfred started for himself before 1900. He had his own machine and he didn't go back to England after all. However, the Wargraph hadn't arrived by the opening date and that was not so good; but the Direktor was equal to it, he advertised in the programme: Edison's Big Wargraph Delayed. He didn't say anything about why but of course the people were waiting with expectations.

When the machine did arrive Alfred was pleased to see that it was the improved Edison model which was much safer to operate because there was a feeding sprocket wheel, as on a modern projector, so the films would not jump off the top spindle. Soon afterwards in 1900 the first Pathe model appeared which was much superior because not only did it have a feed sprocket but it also wound up the films after passing through, so they never touched the floor; it was easily worked by one man.

A little projection house was built. It was removable and stronger than anything previous, to be safe against the audience. It had a roof as protection for Alfred personally and a chimney to take the arc-light fumes away. Inside was a proper workbench. It was luxury.

Working alone, enclosed in his little house, he couldn't announce the films aloud and anyway his voice was too quiet for the job. What he did was to have titles printed very small on waxed paper to stick on glass the same width as the film, and hold them in the gate. When the people had finished reading he closed down the light, took out the glass, put in the film, opened up the light and turned the handle. So, each time there were two intervals: one for the title and one for the picture. Looking back it all seems so clumsy but at the time nobody expected anything else.

While working at the Variete he lived in lodgings not far away and also there was an attractive blonde young lady called Daisy. She was employed at the English Hat Shop because she spoke English. He got on very well with her because they could understand each other.' She also encouraged him to learn more Danish, which he guessed would be a great advantage. She knew nothing at all about films but that didn't worry him: they were married on 27th December 1900.

He stayed on at the Cirkus for fifteen winters. That meant he was free in the summers to be a travelling showman again touring around the large towns of Europe.

There was one incident that caused him some worry. A town he had to visit in 1900 was Budapest and he made the mistake of booking a second class ticket from Copenhagen for he forgot about his baggage with the Wargraph etc. and had only paid for it as far as Berlin. When he got there the man said "You will have to pay £1 to have the baggage moved to Budapest". Well, that was a blow because Alfred thought it was paid for the whole way.. The man could see he was dealing with an Englishman so he said "We take English money". (Alfred thought to himself: Well, so do I if I can get it.) There was not enough money so the man worked out that the baggage could be sent as far as Oldenburg at the frontier between Germany and Austria.

Alfred got into the train and had time to think the problem over, at least twelve hours. There he met a railway man and got talking to him. He was a fine fellow and said "I will fix it for you" and when they reached Oldenburg he jumped around - the Lord knows how many places, Alfred would never have found out in the time - and it was arranged that the baggage was not thrown out at Oldenburg but would go on to Budapest and could be paid for there. That was a great relief but the question was, when Alfred reached his destination what was he going to do?

The train arrived at 10 o'clock at night with Alfred practically penniless, not knowing a soul except the agent who had made the contract and whom he had never seen. He found that the agent was away and his brother had come instead. At that time of night the exchanges were

closed so Alfred asked if he had any Hungarian money he could let him have and showed him his last two kroner of Danish money; the brother had never seen those and fortunately didn't realise how little they were worth - about two shillings and handed over a note that was worth ten times as much. In exchange Alfred gave him the two kroner which were readily accepted and prompted the question "Shall I clear your baggage?" - which was just what Alfred wanted.

He was a few days early for the opening so he had to walk around and keep out of the way until he saw that his apparatus really was in the theatre. As soon as he opened he claimed the advance and was then able to meet the agent's brother and pay him back; and that is how Alfred got through to Budapest.

Throughout 1900 he included in the Cirkus programmes all the films that came from the Boer war - another real war for people to watch. It was a time when business men could see very little future for the film trade. However, 1901 moved a step nearer to that future.

There was excitement in Copenhagen when the singing and talking pictures came through. As far as Alfred could recall it was a Mr. Walter Gibbons in London who began it. Then as now the film trade was always looking for something new.

A Columbia phonograph stood beside the screen and the sound came from wax cylinders with a hardened surface. From there the songs and music were thrown out into the audience through a large brass trumpet. There was therefore a limit to the loudness of the sound because amplifiers had not yet been invented.

Daisy came along that season to operate the phonograph. For there was no mechanical link between that machine and the projector and once the two machines had been started it was up to Alfred to follow the sound as well as he could by turning more quickly or slowly but it was not always that they finished together; sometimes the film was first and sometimes the phonograph. The people were very pleased with the novelty of sound and were not annoyed if it sometimes didn't fit the picture; rather it amused them.

Two examples of the products shown were Marie Lloyd singing and her husband Alec Hurley doing the Cake Walk. After a while, though, the showing of sound films stopped; only about a dozen were issued and then the firm didn't make any more.

At the end of that winter season, April 1902, Alfred went on tour as usual and because he was going to show the sound films Daisy went with him. Having her along made travelling more difficult for they didn't have much money. Lemburg was their first booking, at the theatre owned by a Turk named Chevalier Thorn who had been an illusionist before he settled down with his theatre.

When they got to the station they found that the town was a long way off so they left the heavy equipment behind and hired a small conveyance. Alfred told the man "Drive us to the biggest hotel", even though they couldn't afford it. That was because in the best hotels they never asked for an advance.

The following morning he went to see Direktor Thorn to get some money. "Oh no," said he "you can't have any money before you open!", So that was a failure. The next thing was to get the baggage from the station. Then Alfred remembered the bad state of the roads and the

danger those cylinders would be in. He insisted on going with the driver to the station and it was a good thing he did; he had to sit with the boxful of waxes between his knees otherwise they would all have been smashed and he would have been finished.

They got through in that way and opened and of course collected their advance the next day. Then they moved from that expensive hotel to a cheaper one. Yes, that was a near thing.

1903 brought the next excitement: the arrival of coloured films; not colour photography as we know it now but those with the colours painted on by hand. Alfred was the first to show one in Denmark and that was the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*, which was given an orchestra of eighteen musicians. It ran for about a quarter of an hour and that alone was remarkable, for the roll was 300 metres, one thousand feet long.

It was possible by then to show such a great length without stopping because projectors had top and bottom sprockets and take-up which treated the film gently.

The public was very much impressed by such a splendid presentation. It was films like that which made people realise that the cinematograph was not as they had thought up to then a plaything but was growing big enough for serious use.

Coloured films were the most expensive type available and *Sleeping Beauty* the most expensive of all. It came from France, bought through a man named Mat Raymond at a cost of 1,100 kroner, about £60. It really was coloured by hand: the makers had engaged more than one hundred girls and they used magnifying glasses as they painted with transparent colours every separate detail on each frame all the way along the film, on every copy. No wonder they were expensive - but at least the ordinary black and white films were cheaper than they had been at the beginning, in spite of the fact that comic pictures and dramas were not known at that earlier period.

Alfred showed *Sleeping Beauty* for three months and then the public wanted a change.

Fortunately coloured films did keep turning up so he could show them from time to time. It was two years later, 1905, that the Pathecolour stencil system made it possible to print a lot of copies once the stencils had been made. Each separate colour had a stencil which was prepared by actually cutting out from every frame of an extra print the areas that were to show the same colour. You can imagine what painstaking work was done with sharp, delicate knives but they managed it somehow.

There could be six colours and in that case they needed six stencil prints. They all matched the final print because they came from the same negative, and they were run through a staining machine one colour at a time in contact with the final print and the colours were applied through the stencils by rollers. It was a clever scheme and the results could be surprisingly beautiful - again the public wasn't critical of any faults. Because the processes were expensive their use was limited to short films and occasional sequences inserted into longer films.

In 1904 during his summer season, after he had toured for a few weeks he tried a different idea: he went to Stockholm again and took the plunge by opening a Biograph there and stayed until it was time to return to Copenhagen. He learned something from that: the difficulty of staying in one place and running exclusively as a kinema was that one couldn't

get frequent enough changes of programme to entice the people to come again; kinema-going had not become a habit as it did afterwards.

He certainly couldn't change his stock weekly. He did the next best thing: he put a new film in each week and took one out making a gradual change which carried him through the season, combined with his Sleeping Beauty 'main feature'. He found later that other showmen got over the problem by bringing in Variety to help their films, which was the opposite of the earlier years when films were used as an added attraction to the Variety.

In April 1905 after the winter season at Cirkus Variete he decided to open a Biograph of his own in the town, along the Vimmelskafte. He was short of a partner so he got hold of Ole Olsen as manager and they opened, which was an easy matter at that time: they hired an empty shop, filled it with chairs, 125 loose ones, and got permission from the police.

Each show lasted half an hour and the price was 25 Ore (1.5p) for adults and 10 Ore (1/2p) for children. The programme was a number of small films of different kinds and Alfred kept buying fresh ones: pictures from different countries, such as bullfighting and comedies two minutes long; people were still not so sophisticated in those days. Shows went on from 4pm until the late evening.

Alfred recalled that period: "I'm sorry to say, the partnership lasted only five months. This Ole Olsen was a bit too strong for me. He was the one who thought he was a genius like Napoleon and even called himself Direktor General. Actually he was a ridiculous man, quite useless. and in August I gave up".

Then Alfred did something he'd been wanting to do for a long time. He had been away from home for 7 years and 3 months, so he decided on a holiday and took Daisy with him to show her to Mamma and the family. They liked her very much, as he knew they would. It was a happy month.

In November 1905 Alfred set out to start a new venture, at Aalborg in the north of Denmark. where he had been before. Finding a vacant shop in New Market Place in a building belonging to the Country Residents' Savings Bank he put in 150 chairs. The illustration shows what that Biograph looked like outside with the windows decorated and the programmes fastened up on each side of the doorway.

Biographs were like that then; some had more gaudy decorations, especially at fairgrounds.

It was Aalborg's first and in fact it was the first one in the provinces, outside Copenhagen; but still, Alfred considered it was only temporary because he was really aiming at finishing up with something much better.

He saved a poster showing what that first programme was. It was illustrated many years later in the local newspaper, as here. It translates:

BIOGRAPH THEATRE  
No. 10 NEW MARKET PLACE  
Performance times at 4,5,6,7,8,9 and 10 o'clock.  
Sunday performances every 1/2 hour.  
FOUNTAINS IN VERSAILLES (coloured)  
VOYAGE ACROSS THE IMPOSSIBLE (coloured)

The most magnificent pictures in the world:  
35 different scenes: (\*listed below)  
GODSEJEREN'S FIRST RIDE.  
Admission: 1st class seat 50 Ore, 2nd class 25 Ore children 15 Ore.

\* The 35 different scenes are not readable in the illustration. A likely list would be: London, Paris, Rome, Constantinople, Venice, Cairo and the Pyramids. Through the Suez Canal, The Holy Land. Joppa, Palestine. Jerusalem, Mount of Olives, Mosques of Omar and the Holy Sepulchre, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Malta, Genoa, Gibraltar, The beautiful island of Madeira, Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay, Hong Kong, Singapore, Peking, Tokohama, New Zealand. Sydney, Melbourne, San Francisco, Yosemite Valley, Salt Lake City, California, New York. A trip around the world!

By that period there were titles incorporated in the films themselves to announce what would be seen next, so the showman didn't have to shout out. Voyage across the Impossible was a Jules Verne type of fantasy made in France by Melies, a remarkable trick film, not only coloured but lasting 20 minutes. The short films that were shown with it were made up into rolls of 1,000 feet so that the pauses for changing were cut down to every quarter of an hour.

Thus, Alfred came to have a theatre of his own but it was not easy to get the people in, they were not yet in the habit of it; in Copenhagen yes but not in the provinces. He was the first showman they had seen. He advertised in the newspapers and posters that Living Pictures had arrived but not many took notice. The adapted shop was too little to attract them, not impressive enough like the Picture Palaces that came later.

In any case attendances were small during the summer but those few at least liked the entertainment and told their friends. Alfred kept open summer and winter because he wanted to educate the people into the Biograph habit. It did come eventually but the moment it came other showmen opened up because then the audience was there.

But still. once his theatre was going he did not have time to be always in Aalborg so he appointed as manager Edvin Berntsson, a Swede he had known from Goteborg in 1900. There were four on the staff: the projectionist, the girl in the ticket office, a man to show people to their seats - and of course the manager; he looked after everything leaving Alfred free to show films again in the Cirkus Variete Copenhagen.

On 29th January 1906 King Christian IX died. Alfred took part in making a film record of the funeral. The experience taught him to buy a camera of his own so that he could record other local events and then that became an essential part of his work.

There was already a local man who owned a camera and he had the main rights for photographing the royal family in Copenhagen but that was just for the family, not to show to the public.

However, Alfred did film a royal event. It happened that Norway had become independent in 1905 and Prince Charles of Denmark was offered the throne, which he accepted and so became King Haakon VII. His departure for Norway early in 1906 was recorded by Alfred.

That year was an active time for him. He remembered and copied Mr. Thomas: he trained

travelling showmen and sent them out, not only in Denmark but places like Sweden, anywhere where people hadn't seen the Living Pictures yet or wanted to see more.

The number of cameramen making new films had grown. At the beginning there had been only Lumiere, Robert Paul and Birt Acres, and Melies in Paris; and up to then there was only a limited number of films made so they just went around to everybody. Later came Hepworth in England with that great fat policeman falling into the water and other comic stunts.

By 1906 men with cameras were making films all over the place.

For some time Alfred's were only local. There were plenty of happenings in Copenhagen such as someone famous arriving, or there could be a big funeral coming off in Stockholm and recording that was simple enough. Also, any showman in the provinces who was starting a Biograph would want a local film to attract the people to see themselves; Alfred would make such an item for them. There may be a monument to be unveiled and he would be there. not forgetting to include scenes of the crowd watching - that was important. Those local films were good for business.

Negative film stocks used were Eastman Kodak and Lumiere. The Lumiere was a little cheaper and more contrasty. the Kodak was softer and gave more detail. 60 metres (200ft) was the length most often used because it gave a good three minutes running time without reloading. The roll was on a spool in the magazine and went from top to bottom inside the camera, unless it was a Pathe, that had an extra box on the top. The film was nearly always 60 metres because that would be the order. If it were more the roll had to be changed; it was the usual thing at a funeral - change once. It was possible to obtain the 30 metres but that tended to be too short.

In the years following 1906, besides continuing to show films Alfred did everything in picture-making except manufacture raw stock. He maintained darkrooms full of equipment, for he had first to perforate the raw stock for use in his cameras. Then after filming, his negatives were developed in a large tank with the film wound on to wooden frames which held 20 metres each, so all film taken out of a camera was cut into those lengths in the dark. The dried negatives went through his printing machines to make positives which were developed in another tank with a different developer. Often the work had to be rushed. to get the results on to the screen the same day.

In Aalborg in 1907 Alfred saw a property empty in East Yard, larger than at New Market Place, so he transferred to it. Instead of loose chairs he made an improvement with fixed benches to accommodate 200 people. It was also a good opportunity to improve the projectionist's box by having it against the back wall away from the audience and more solidly made, much better for the operator's peace of mind.

That summer for a change Alfred had a season of showing at the Tivoli Gardens, Copenhagen, and in the Over Stalden at Charlottenlund the seaside resort. His time was full with all his commitments.

On 8th December 1907 King Oscar II of Sweden died. A man was sent to Stockholm to photograph the funeral and he came back with his two 60m. rolls and when they had been developed and printed there were the usual six 20m. sections to join together in the right order. Alfred watched him to see that he did it properly, starting at the end so that the front of the film would be on the outside ready for showing. Alfred watched through the first five

pieces but before the sixth one he turned away to take his coat off, letting the man finish unaided. Then Alfred grabbed the roll thinking it was all right but when he started showing he saw the opening scene upside down after all. That's what caused the uproar of stamping feet, whistles and shouting. The only thing he could do was to keep going so he turned at full speed to get through that 20m. in a hurry. What an embarrassment, fortunately a rare occurrence for him.

During a Cirkus Variete season in 1908 a reporter called to see Alfred at work and his subsequent paragraphs said: "*We knock on the door of the little house built in the middle of the row of box seats. Inside, which is properly called the operating box, It is very warm. There stands Mr.Gee in his shirt sleeves between his machines: one is a Wargaph or cinematograph projector and the other is a large magic lantern. On a bench are his flat round tin boxes containing films and the square boxes of glass plates for showing advertising slides. In the front wall are two or three windows through which the light beams stream out and send the living pictures and adverts on to the white screen in the Cirkus. Mr.Gee can see what is taking place around him without being seen himself. He is an Englishman and speaks good Danish almost without accent and only now and again does an English word sneak in between the Danish.*"

Something else that happened in 1908 was the start of building the new Christiansborg, the House of Parliament, and that was when Alfred had his greatest success with a topical item. He filmed the foundation stone being laid by Alberti the prime minister. Three weeks later Alberti was arrested; he had swindled the town of so much money that he got eight years in prison. Alfred didn't get a picture of the arrest, only of that laying ceremony but as a consequence of the scandal everyone was keen to see the film again.

In the same year he took what he felt were the first advertising films made in Denmark; one in the Zoological Gardens and another in the Tivoli Gardens, to show people the attractions, which is a way of advertising. He also took scenes of the fire brigade doing their exercises including where they jumped from the buildings and he showed the result in King's Gardens; then the takings were handed over to the firemen's benevolent fund.

However, he also made a film for a big Copenhagen firm called English House, for advertising, and Alfred was inclined to think that theirs was most likely the first genuine example of film advertising because they paid for his service; whereas the other instances were of public places and he wasn't paid for the work, only doing it to help them.

In December 1909 King Leopold 11 of Belgium died, another obvious subject for a topical film and Alfred sent a man there. What a lot of good funerals there were about.

In 1910 the rebuilding of the Cirkus began and in March 1911 it opened with a new name, The Central Theatre. Its character had also changed for the main entertainment was provided by operettas and farces.

A theatre programme of the time says:

*"Since the rebuilding Alfred James Gee continues to be responsible for the Living Pictures and must see that these are shown in the proper manner. His operating box has been moved up on to the roof and it is from there that he throws his lightstreams down. He turns the machine with a quietness which is the sign of a genuine Englishman and takes*

*no notice of the tropical heat in the box nor the stormy weather which sometimes threatens to blow the whole box away."*

It was useful that Alfred was already set up there for projection because one of the plays had a clever idea: there was a filmed insert in it. The story was about a wife who gave a pair of her husband's trousers to a beggar at the door. The husband came home with great excitement saying that his lottery ticket had won the first prize. He looked for the ticket in the trousers and then found that his wife had given them away, so they both rushed off to find the beggar.

Immediately a large white sheet was let down in front of the stage and Alfred started off the film showing the scenes where they were hunting the beggar. While that was being watched the stage behind the screen was re-set for when the chase was over; they had plenty of time because the film was on for fifteen minutes. The husband and wife chased the beggar around the town right up to the scene that was represented on the stage, when the projector stopped and the screen was whisked away for the live action to continue.

It was a great novelty, something new that the people were always wanting.

On 14th August 1912 there was yet another royal funeral; the king of Denmark Frederick VIII died unexpectedly after reigning only six years. The English firm of Barker's Motion Photography which made a speciality of topical events sent Jack Smith and another man over to film the occasion.

Alfred recalled the meeting with pleasure:

*"To my surprise Jack Smith hired me to turn one of the cameras. I remembered him because he was Robert Paul's assistant in the business when the first machines were sold in 1896. I was amused to hear that I was already known as Copenhagen Gee, a name that Paul had given me. We filmed first the procession in Copenhagen. The bier started there and then went on by train to Rookilde where the cathedral and royal mausoleum were. We raced at once by motorcar to Roskilde (Jack Smith thought it was a wonderful ride) and filmed the train's arrival before going on to the cathedral. At one point we had to trespass through the barrier to get a good picture of the bier and when the mayor spotted us he drew his sword and charged at us - he was furious - so we had to retreat. Fortunately it didn't matter because by then we had got what we wanted. That was on a Friday.*

*The rolls of negative went to England for processing. My print came back on the following Thursday and I showed it that afternoon in my programme.*

*I was pleased to have met Jack Smith, and took the opportunity of buying one of the cameras he brought over. which was better than mine."*

The winter of 1912/13 was Alfred's last at the Central Theatre. He still ran the Biograph at Aalborg but he didn't show elsewhere any more, that all stopped in 1913. By then every Variety had its own machine and the electrician in the establishment ran it. Getting engagements for such shows had run out and that was also the end of his travelling showmen.

However, it was then that he had the chance to branch out into something different, as representative for the company Transatlantic Films Ltd. Their main office was in Oxford Street, London. an agent for the product of Universal Films of America. Alfred's Copenhagen

office was the first of its kind in the whole of Scandinavia. It was put up in fine style with a lady secretary, an operator and a comfortable theatre for the clients. His films went out to Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland; mostly Universal of course but he also sold French, English and Italian sold some and rented out others.

Films were beginning to be five- and six-reelers, playing more than an hour each. About 25% was the titles, so the picture could be 1,500 metres and by the time the titles were added it would be about 2,000m; a different set of titles cut in for each country.

Alfred's film renting company was the first in Denmark to send out arials. The Americans were sending over plenty of their productions, which were usually very good and he was doing well for himself. Then of course the War broke out.

That made films more difficult to get, especially as the European ones almost stopped because of the shortage of materials and men.

Because it was neutral, Denmark did receive some war films from Germany but, most important, enough still got through from across the Atlantic.

The Americans were quick to take advantage of the state of Europe; they filled the gap with a lot of exciting pictures. There were dramas with titles such as Saved at the last moment. The mark of the tribe, The Lord of the Jungle and Jewel Smuggling, and there were always good comedies of one or two reels, which were just the entertainment the people needed - and in spite of all the many troubles of wartime Alfred did manage somehow to despatch to customers all over the country.

After the war the Americans easily kept their lead, swamping the world with their Hollywood product - and no one has beaten them.

Alfred continued to represent Transatlantic and to run his Biograph. That went on until 1921 when he gave up with Transatlantic and became freelance. He purchased from London and Paris and travelled around Scandinavia placing them on his own.

One thing he found was that German films were not popular. he saw his chance to move the Aalborg Biograph to Bishop Street in a much more convenient position and that became his permanent place; he didn't move again, for he knew that he had found what he was looking for. The new place, like so many, had originally been an ordinary shop before the usual conversion and there was nothing special about it except its position. Alfred changed the name to City Biograph and set about making a number of important improvements.

The benches were put in, made more comfortable with backs and soft seating. The projection box was rebuilt properly. outside the auditorium and high enough to be above the heads of the audience. For the first time he installed two machines and could then give continuous showing by changing over from one reel to the next alternatively; it gave a much better show, for the people never had to get impatient waiting for the next reel to start. The projectors were still hand-turned, the motor system not coming until later. His staff increased: two operators, two girls for the ticket office, two men to show the people to their seats, and a pianist.

The City Biograph held only 240 at first. Afterwards it was rebuilt specially for Alfred, made nearly twice as long so as to seat about 400.

In 1935 the authorities made a law, that if you have a kinema licence you must not trade with films. either selling or hiring. You had to choose between your kinema licence and your distributing licence. Alfred chose to keep his kinema. He said *"In my opinion that's the best part of the business, it is safer. If you buy films and you make too many mistakes you can't hire them out and you lose money, whereas when you have a kinema you can pick what you are going to show and use your instincts about whether your audience will like them or not. The risks are not so great; you don't go after the sellers, they have to come after you"*.

There was already a law which stated that it was not permitted to own a kinema in one town and live in another town. A magazine article explained how it was Alfred could have his kinema in Aalborg and yet live in Copenhagen: *"Mr.Gee the fortunate man is the only one in the circumstances who will ever receive this favourable permission. It is on account of the fact that he was a bioscope pioneer in Denmark, one of those who taught us the enjoyment of seeing the living pictures and demonstrated how those pictures educated us"*.

In 1932 in London there was a meeting of the 1903 Cinema Veterans' Society. It was a most exclusive club. It had only a small number of members and no one could be admitted without fulfilling one condition: he must have worked in the film industry in 1903 or before. The club had headquarters in London but the members were spread over the world. They had never been gathered all together in a meeting nor walked together for company.

The entire pleasure of being a member consisted of the honour of being authorised as a pioneer.

At the 1932 meeting the chairman Captain Jack Smith proposed and Robert W.Paul seconded that Mr.Alfred James Gee be voted as an honorary member of the Society. He was unanimously elected.

Alfred considered that the City Biograph was his good fortune, for matters so turned out that he was given a life concession; that is, he could keep his licence for life, which meant that he never had to apply for renewal. He was one of the few who were granted that privilege in Denmark; there were only four of them and by 1952 Alfred was the only one left alive.

The one worrying aspect of the licence system was that when an owner died he couldn't be sure that the kinema would stay in the family; the place was announced as free and anyone could apply for it, causing a struggle to settle who would take over the licence. A committee considered the application - preferring local people so that in most cases the wife or son was fortunate; but sometimes they were not. If the privilege had been free a man could let his business go to whom he wished in the family that was Alfred's view of the matter.

TAILPIECES (Added in 1982)

1954 The manager Mr.Berntsson died. after being there over 40 years. Alfred's daughter Mamie became the new manager. At that time the lady cashier had been there for 35 years.

1955 A newspaper article talked about the fiftieth anniversary of Alfred's Biograph in Aalborg, which was about as long as there had been one at all in Denmark; and also pointed out that Alfred was a still active film man who had been in the Industry, as a showman and kinema manager, continuously from its beginning.

1966 At the age of 88 Alfred celebrated his 70th anniversary as the world's oldest film showman.

1970 He died at the age of 92. Mamie was granted the licence for the City Biograph. (In 1982 she still runs it but says that business is not good; it is nothing like the old days.)

So: here we can say that the pioneer years have well and truly vanished into history.