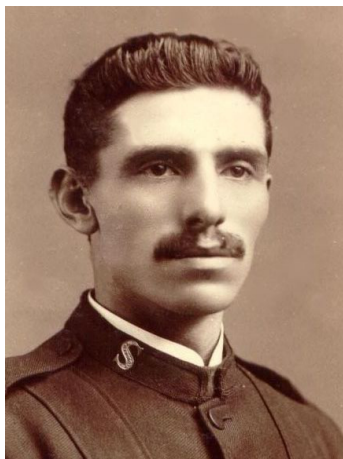


Perry's Legacy

In the March 2006 edition, the lead article was titled *OUR BIRTHING SUITE*. It detailed a visit by the editor to the birth place of the Australian moving image industries – the headquarters of the Salvation Army's Limelight unit in Bourke St. Melbourne. The visit was facilitated by the Salvo's Territorial Archivist and AMMPT Member, **Lindsay Cox** and proved to be a very moving experience for the visitor as he entered rooms which were virtually untouched since they were used in the production of some of the world's earliest feature films such as the Australian icon *SOLDIERS OF THE CROSS*. The following article is from Adelaide based AMMPT Member **Michael Wollenberg**, great grandson of an industry pioneer.

Re-discovering the film legacy of Australian cinema pioneer, JOSEPH HENRY PERRY



Despite it being a rain soaked night on September 13th 1900, Major Joe Perry of The Salvation Army stood before an audience of 4000, who had packed the Melbourne Town Hall to view the premiere of the soul-thrilling lecture *SOLDIERS OF THE CROSS*.

The crowd, which filled the main hall's floor and gallery, were amazed at the projected moving-pictures, as images of Christian martyrs were burnt at the stake, eaten by lions, crucified, hacked to pieces and thrown into burning lime.

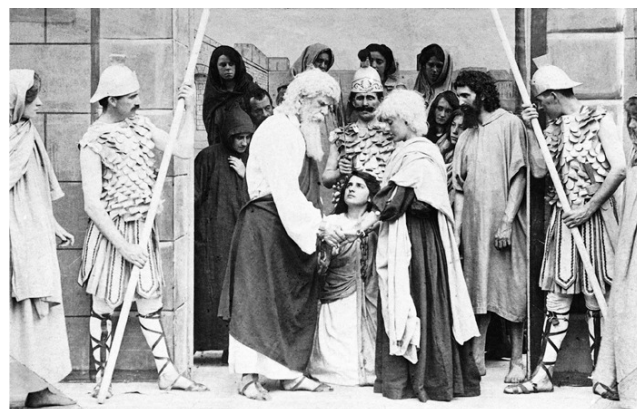
So stark and graphically realistic were Major Perry's images that members of the audience screamed in horror, openly cried and women fainted! The audience ignoring the original request for no clapping during the presentation rose as one and gave a resounding ovation. Nothing like it had been seen before, and it caused an immediate sensation. This was truly modern cinema going - as an event.

The lecture was in fact, a ground breaking multi-media production; Perry's ingenious alliance of the Magic Lantern, the Kinematographe and the newly invented Graphophone. Lasting for two and a half hours, it consisted of 3000 feet of film, 200 hand coloured glass lanternslides, accompanied by a 20-piece orchestra and the booming narration of Commandant Herbet Booth. It created a profound impression on the hundreds who attended. Arguably, the first religious film, the first spectacle film in the world - had been born.

Perry's skills as a publicist and technician led him to setting up and operating the famous Limelight Department of the Salvation Army in Melbourne. This was the film production unit that played the leading role in the pioneering and development of the Australian film industry from 1894 to 1909. The film sequences of *SOLDIERS OF THE CROSS* was the first use of moving-pictures for a feature-length narrative drama in Australia, and possibly the world.

The Salvation Army's Murrumbena Girls home had been transformed into a 14-acre studio, where the Roman Colosseum was photographed on painted backdrops hung on the adjoining tennis courts. Major Perry's production and art departments produced written scripts, a range of highly detailed and elaborate sets and an extensive range of impressive period costumes and props. Smaller sets were purposely built on the roof of Salvation Army Headquarters at 69 Bourke Street, and today, is probably the world's oldest surviving film studio in the Southern Hemisphere, if not the world.

When the Murrumbena studio was not appropriate, Perry simply upped his crew and went on location. The original film segment featuring the raging river Tiber in which the martyr Calepodius was thrown, was in actual fact photographed at the Richmond Public Baths. Many incidents of the sufferings of the early Christian martyrs were portrayed with surprising fidelity. For the throwing of the Christians to the lion's scene, the blood on the actors was fake, but real lions were procured from the touring Fitzgerald circus. When a fierce beast emerged from its cage to devour the kneeling Christians, at the centre of the tennis court, it was actually Joseph Perry's sons Orrie and Reg in a paper mache body, with heavy padded legs. Orrie had two strings, one to move the eyes and the other to move the lower jaw down. Reg brought up the rear, with a string to wag the tail as they loped up to the terrified band and clamped the jaws onto one of them. A photograph was taken of this scene and a coloured slide made, and when the pictures screened, this slide was flashed on the screen with blood flowing from the wound. Besides creating a greater impact on the audience, it enabled Perry to put his next roll of film on the projector without a break in the continuity of the show.



Scene from *SOLDIERS OF THE CROSS*

The "living pictures" were shot on the Limelight Department's Lumiere Kinematographe, which was limited to film loads of 100feet - 90 seconds. The same machine with the addition of a carbon-arc light source was also the projection. Ever alert to keep pace with the times, Major Perry and Commandant Herbet Booth (the son of Salvation Army founder; General William Booth) had purchased the Kinematographe in February 1897. Carl Hertz is generally believed to be the first to person to screen pictures in Australia in 1896, at the end of Vaudeville shows at the Tivoli theatre.



Major Perry with some of his equipment

The cost of the epic production was 550 pounds, apparently being 50 pounds over budget! - much to the concern of General Booth - and used a cast of not fewer than 150 actors, including many members of Major Perry's own family. Perry, the innovative "genial joker" was considered an expert in this new field, and it was in the creation of the film segments in *SOLDIERS OF THE CROSS* that he set international benchmarks.

Being Australia's first dramatic feature film, and possibly the world's - the two are *inextricably linked* - it was a startling, stirring and often violent dramatisation of the early Christian martyrs in Biblical times. This "lecture" was overwhelmingly commercially successful, and hundreds of converts were recruited to the Salvation Army.

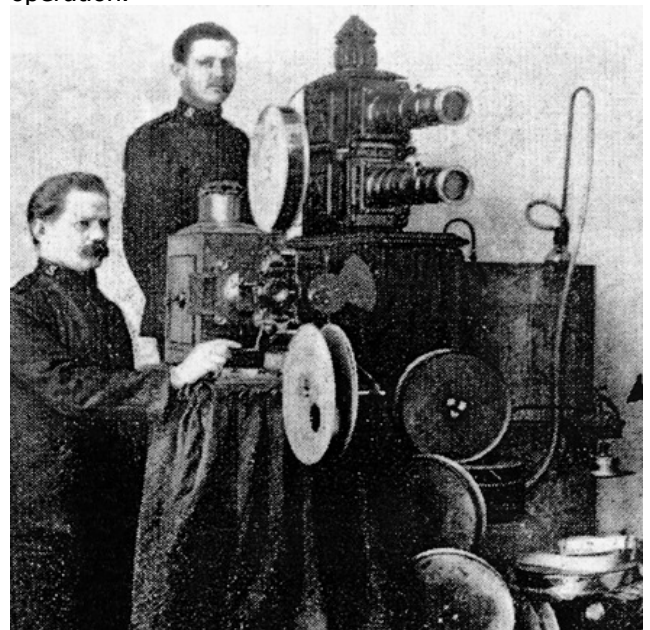
The *SOLDIERS OF THE CROSS* musical score was possibly the first ever compiled for a film presentation and in terms of artistic motivation and technical training it's advent had far reaching effects on the Australian and world film industries. Perhaps most impressive, was the idea behind the production; a visual and aural spectacular which sought to convey a message by completely absorbing the attention and emotions of it's audience for an extended period. Perry and Booth equally saw the principle that worked so well for Cecile B. DeMille and many others for decades to come. Legend has it, that DeMille saw *SOLDIERS OF THE CROSS* as a boy when it toured the United States with Commandant Booth, and was inspired to make his own great religious epics.

The impact of the film on it's turn of the century audience can never really be understood by us today.

But the Limelight Departments achievement inspired a nation, and over the following ten years Australia went on to become the major source of silent film production, producing more feature films than any other country in the world.

In 1901, Commandant Booth left Australia and took the only copies of *SOLDIERS OF THE CROSS* and it's slides to America. Unfortunately the film was lost, and despite concerted local and international searches no trace of the film segments has been found. However, many of the original coloured glass lantern-slides are held in the archives of the National Film and Sound Archive in Canberra.

That same year Perry - with the recently enlarged and improved "Limelight Department" was appointed official Cinematographer to the Duke and Duchess of York, who opened the first Federation of Parliament in Melbourne. He also covered the same visit to New Zealand. Perry made an amazing variety of films after this. In 1901 he filmed the NSW government's first film commission; the Federation procession and Boer War military review, Centennial Park, Sydney. This was the first Australian "feature-length" news film - over half an hour long. The Victorian Government engaged him to film local beauty spots and the moving pictures were screened nightly above the Princess Bridge railway station. A year earlier in January 1900, Perry filmed the second Australian Boer War contingent leaving the Melbourne docks. This was the first film commissioned by the Australian Government. Commercial interests also availed themselves to this "...new medium of advertising..." Perry made films of sweets and Arnott's biscuit factories. By this time, moving pictures, mainly English and French, were becoming available in Australia. After viewing, these were bought outright at so much per foot by the Salvation Army, and Perry organised one-man limelight outfits which travelled Australia, giving shows in town and country halls, and at one period had more than 20 in operation.



A two man Biorama Company crew in action

Regular picture shows were given throughout Australia, and Saturday night at halls in many towns and suburbs became picture night. At Balmain in New South Wales, for instance, it cost three pence for a seat and a penny to sit on the floor. A brisk trade was done much to the dismay of the travelling theatre companies, whose own performances were abandoned by the public as news of Major Perry's moving pictures were in town! Instead of playing in the Salvation Army halls, the biggest theatre or hall in town was engaged.

General Booth was impressed by what Perry had achieved and promoted him from Major to Brigadier, which meant more money and was further employed instructing other officers in his filming techniques. A Major Howse proved a great success, moving from the Salvation Army to America to become chief cameraman with Fox Studios and received an Oscar.

In 1904, Perry re-organised the highly productive and successful Limelight Department as the "New Biorama Company", which toured New Zealand - (with a 26 piece brass band to provide the music)



The Salvation Army brass band

and Britain, where Perry filmed prolifically during the Salvation Army's International Congress. Nearly 10,000 feet of film in two and a half hours - was taken, with some segments still surviving from a 1956 British produced documentary.

The "new" Biorama Company also introduced pictures by electric light to remote locations in Australia, where electricity was, at that time, unknown. A special 3-cylinder portable engine, with a belt drive to a huge dynamo, provided the current, not only for the pictures but to light the hall.

Talking pictures were also featured at this time; the Cinephone, a combination of a Gramophone and Biograph. A little clock hand was photographed revolving in the left hand corner of the picture, and a similar illuminated hand, contained in a metal box was geared by the gramophone motor. The operator had to keep both hands moving in synchronisation. Well known music hall artists of the period appeared in these 100 feet length, films.

Returning to Melbourne in 1907 - from filming extensively for the New Zealand tourism department,

Perry erects a new, modern, purpose built studio in Caulfield in preparation for new feature-film productions. Here he remakes *SOLDIERS OF THE CROSS*, with new story elements, which was eventually titled *HEROES OF THE CROSS*. Also made at the time was the *THE SCOTTISH COVENANTERS*. Adapted from the Protestant and political classic Scottish saga, stage actors were engaged and it was filmed mainly on location near Mt. Buller, north west of Melbourne. It was never shown in Australia owing to the closure of the Limelight Department. These productions saw the end of Brigadier Perry's association with the Salvation Army, leaving a legacy of over 800 moving picture films of varying length and type.

Despite the enormous and continued success of the moving pictures, it fell to the new Commissioner James Hay; who was of the opinion that this form of entertainment was "*the work of the devil*" to close down the Limelight department in 1910.

My great grandfather's two sons, the oldest Orrie, and my grandfather Reginald, who had been working with their father since their early teens, had resigned from the Salvation Army some months before Joe. They were immediately hired by the film production firm Johnson & Gibson, who were at the time making additions to *THE KELLY GANG* which they had originally produced in 1906. Reg as assistant to Orrie, as chief cameraman, filmed extra sequences at Blackburn and Mitcham outside of Melbourne. Together they shot the film, and in a studio at the back of Johnson and Gibson's oxygen works at St Kilda Junction developed the negative, made the titles, printed the positive, and edited and joined the 400ft lengths of film together. Here, the two Perry sons were joined by younger brother Stan, and together they worked on the first feature productions of 4-5000 feet in length, at a time when the longest films from overseas were two reels of 2,000 feet. These pictures included, *THE MYSTERY OF THE HANSON CAB*, *THE DOUBLE EVENT*, *NEVER TO LATE TO MEND* and an dramatic adaptation from the stage production, *THE LUCK OF ROARING CAMP*.

In 1909 the Australian Government, despite objections from Perry and others, inexplicably gave it's film production contracts to the French firm Pathe Freres, terminating the profitable commissions the Army had relied on. American distribution companies then signed a deal with the Government, and through bulk buying it became cheaper to import American films.

With such a reputation in the commercial world, Joe Perry had little difficulty in obtaining a position as General Manager of Johnson & Gibson. He then accepted a position of Eastern representative for what had now become Australasian Films, based in Sourabaya (Java) He remained there for 14 years. In 1930 he returned to Australia and lived in retirement in Melbourne and Sydney, until his death in 1943 at the age of 81.

However, his name and fame lived on in his three sons; Orrie took up picture theatre management with Amalgamated Pictures at the Glacarium, Melbourne, then managed the Lyric and Kings Cross Theatres in Sydney. Stan showed the first films at the Majestic Theatre, Melbourne, and then went onto other theatre managements and film exhibiting work in Perth. Reg, retained his interest in camera work and after a successful film-making career, opened up the South Australian branch for Universal Pictures in 1922, which he managed for 42 years. Reginald's eldest son Kevin, returned from overseas service with the A.I.F. in 1945, and became a theatre manager in Adelaide, as did Reg's two sons-in law, David and Stan who were also involved in picture theatre management. Reg's youngest daughter Patricia, also worked in the film and television industry in Adelaide until her retirement in 1990. I represent the fourth generation of an Australian family of film makers that has devoted over one hundred years of service to the motion picture industry.

I have grown up with the inspirational legacy of my great grandfather and now through my work will hopefully bring the legend, humour and magic of Joe Perry to yet another generation. Although seemingly forgotten by some, Perry's pioneering legacy lives on through his sons and their spirit of adventure embracing the new medium of movie-making.

Imagine yourself, creating something for the first time that is an enormous risk and too radical to be initially considered by your contemporaries, yet eventually your work is recognised as ground-breaking. All Australians should recognise our first screen hero and celebrate this historically and culturally significant Australian film figure.

Perhaps as more Australians become aware of the significant role of their country, and that of Perry and the Limelight Department in the birth of motion pictures, a passion to once again shape the industry and give a new voice and form to the medium will arise.

To end this story I leave you with a quote from the December 1933 edition of Everyman's Magazine who interviewed Joe Perry on his return from Java – his eyes light with pride when he talks of the past and points to the magnificence of the film industry today.

"... great to be a pioneer and be spared to witness your confidence and effort, rewarded far beyond the wildest fancy of the first enthusiasm..."

By Michael Wollenberg

Ed's Note: Michael is currently finalising the script for a proposed feature film on the Perry and Limelight story. We wish him well and hope his search for financing for the venture gets the results it deserves.

Containment

The ongoing saga of trying to find permanent storage space for the growing collection is always of concern, especially as there is a limit to the amount of bulky but significant items that can be stored at Members' homes. We already have a sea container full of items donated from the **Allan Jones**



Ron Jones (centre) and son Chris check the condition of items stored in the Busselton container.

collection being held by his son and Member **Ron Jones** in Busselton (see story May 2005 edition) which are soon to be entered on our new system.

With the growth of the collection in the metro area it has become necessary to divert funds towards other secure temporary storage. The committee decided to purchase another sea container at a very reasonable price in very good watertight condition and install it



at Member **Fred Clausen's** semi rural property in the Swan Valley. Fred also is storing several display cabinets donated by Channel Seven

Perth. Volunteers are now required to assist in building shelving to go in the container and for the other storage unit in Kwinana donated by Cooperative Bulk Handling at their Kwinana grain terminal.



Fred Clausen (left) & Graham Lacey inspect the recently purchased container to be used for temporary storage.

Raffle donations invited

With the success of our first two screenings this season of Classics of the Silver Screen at the Cygnet Cinema, the format of running a raffle each week is providing us with an average of an additional \$100 above the box office takings. To date, each raffle has offered three prizes which have been donated by Members. They usually comprise a bottle of a red and a white wine and a large box of chocolates. Hoyts have also generously donated several double passes for shows at their cinemas. If other Members would like to donate similar prizes it would take the load off "the usual suspects" and be greatly appreciated.