

THE LAST NEWSREEL

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It did, perhaps receive better press coverage at its demise than at any time during its brief five-year career. As the Cinesound Movietone **Australian Movie Magazine** went out to the theatres for the last time on November 27, it was realised that the perennial weekly newsreel had, with a sudden finality, disappeared from the Australian screen after something like 70 years, and that a whole facet of Australian Filmmaking had passed into history.

In a post-television age the longevity of local newsreel production has been extraordinary. All but one of the major international reels have long since disappeared and there are few countries which still produce cinema newsreels for domestic release. Yet, up to five years ago, when Cinesound and Movietone merged to produce the Movie Magazine, the local market still carried two weekly newsreels. Inexorably, the economics of it all finally rang down the curtain.

No-one can now verify the date or title of the first Australian newsreel, though the newsreel format as we have come to know it – a magazine film containing short actuality items on current events - was established by about 1910. But this grew out of earlier, less formalised actuality films which concentrated on single events - sometimes of national, but mostly of a very localised interest. The first of these actually managed to be both: the now famous record of the 1896 Melbourne Cup by Lumiere cameraman Maurice Sestier. His technique was, as might be expected, a little rudimentary, but he had a newsreel man's feel for action, enlivening - with a little help from some hat-waving friends in the foreground - footage of the actual race with some of the excitement that was presumably felt at the occasion. He started a tradition, for the race has been filmed by cinema newsmen ever year since, with Cinesound and Movietone competing to get their coverage on to the city screens mere hours after the event. Later, **Movietone News** and the **Movie Magazine** would go to colour for the occasion.

After the turn of the century other cameramen - Franklyn Barrett, Harry Krischock and the Salvation Army's Limelight Department among them - followed in Sestier's wake, recording current events for presentation both in halls and in the First of the then emerging picture theatres.

In 1911-12, four of the pioneering producers/exhibitors in the rapidly developing film industry - Cozens Spencer, W. A. Gibson, T. J. West and J. D. Williams - merged their separate interests to form what became Union Theatres Ltd. and its production subsidiary, Australian Films. The weekly **Australian** (later **Australasian**) **Gazette** then adopted Spencer's kangaroo trademark and made its first appearance, superseding **Spencer's Gazette** and presumably other, now unknown, actuality series produced separately by the four partners. Backed by a large distribution base, the **Australian Gazette** grew and, coupled with a similar growth by some of its competitors (of which there were many), the one-off, one-man newsreels and actuality "specials" gave way to the nationally distributed multi-item reels. These featured the contributions of many cameramen around the country, and editions of the reel would vary considerably from state to state to ensure a suitable proportion of local-interest material. The comparative ease with which silent newsreels could be rearranged (there was no sound track to worry about) contributed greatly to this flexibility.

Reliable records of the **Gazette's** history are meagre and only a few of its issues survive in complete form now, but they exemplify characteristics of the silent newsreel which the coming of sound was to alter. Lacking the support of a commentary, information and impact had to be conveyed largely by visuals, supplemented - as was frequently necessary - by titles which provided facts, Figures, names and other non-visual information. To a modern viewer the treatment seems curiously slow and detached, although, in their original setting, the reels would have had the atmospheric support of the cinema musicians and employed a range of colour tints common in the silent days. The stories were short and a typical reel might have had six or seven of them. For instance:

- "H.M.A.S. Australia" in Cockatoo Docks;
- Sydney: State Theatre building in progress;
- Melbourne: Spencer St. Bridge works;
- Manly Governor Philip Memorial;
- Randwick: Cross-country race;
- Sydney: Preparing for the future - the underground railway under construction, Circular Quay, the North Shore Bridge;
- Jean of William St. - a woman petrol station operator;
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comprised the contents of Gazette No. 936 in 1929. Nothing earth shattering - it may have been a dull week - but the range of items includes human interest, news, sport and action, and a bit of free publicity for Union Theatres.

Among the **Gazette's** rivals were the Australasian edition of **Pathe's Animated Gazette**, smaller local reels like the **Express Gazette**, and the international reels distributed by overseas majors such as Paramount and Fox which often included spliced-in stories of local origin. The **Gazette** stayed its course as the principal Australian reel until the market for silent films disappeared with the advent of talkies in 1930. Veteran cameraman Jim Pearson recalled how the last issue contained all the choice "magazine" items that had been kept on ice as fillers for the weeks when newsworthy material was thin. In 20 years, **Australasian Gazette** had produced nearly 1000 weekly issues.

The worldwide conversion to sound meant the adjustment of newsreels to this new method of presentation and to the possibilities it offered. The Fox Film Corporation in the U.S. was quick off the mark with its sound-on-film Movietone system and by 1929 it was distributing an international **Fox Movietone News**. In October of that year its Australian unit (Cameraman Ray Vaughan and sound engineer Paul Hance) was established to produce regular local items for inclusion in Australian prints of the international reel. The first item was an interview with Prime Minister James Scullin, who spoke to the Australian people at the onset of the Great Depression. The second item was the Melbourne Cup of 1929.

By the end of 1930, the popularity of these items (and some occasional one-reel "specials" produced by the unit) was such that, from January 1931, **Fox Movietone News - Australian Edition** appeared, under the editorship of Harry Lawrenson, as a complete weekly reel in its own right. The Movietone kookaburras were now an established trademark and, like the Cinesound kangaroo, were to become something of an institution over the next 40 years.

Movietone's success engendered competition from two quarters. In 1931, the Melbourne *Herald* newspaper joined with Herschell's Films and formed Australian Sound Films Pty Ltd to produce a sound newsreel which would be sponsored by major newspapers in five states. Using British Visatone sound recording equipment, the first issue of **The Herald Newsreel** (the title varied according to the state and the newspaper concerned) was released on September 21, 1931. The reel was vigorously promoted and the contents, if a little mundane at first, improved rapidly.

In Sydney, a few weeks after the **Herald's** advent, the first **Cinesound Review** appeared, produced by Ken G. Hall, with assistance from Bert Cross. Hall was, at the time, in the middle of location shooting for Cinesound's first feature, **On Our Selection**, and at the insistence of Union Theatres' managing director, Stuart F. Doyle, Hall travelled from Penrith to Sydney each night to supervise the newsreel. If his nerves were a little frayed by overwork it didn't show in either project: the **Review**, like **Selection**, was an undoubted success and quickly gathered steam. And Union Theatres again had a weekly reel to fill the void left by the defunct **Australasian Gazette**, and a new product to help stimulate the company's lagging fortunes in the Depression. The first issue of the **Review** opened with an on-camera introduction by commentator Charles Lawrence, and it featured, naturally, a coverage of the 1931 Melbourne Cup.

The three reels competed energetically for their share of news scoops: in March 1932, Cinesound alone managed to photograph Captain de Groot's attempt to open the Sydney Harbour Bridge ahead of Premier Jack Lang (stills from their negative were sent to newspapers around the world); and the following July the **Herald** caught the sinking of the "Casino" and the rescue of its survivors. Distance put the **Herald** at a disadvantage in an all-night dash to Canberra to film the swearing-in of the Lyons ministry on January 6, 1932; but their coverage of Lyons introducing his Cabinet members was first on the screen (in Melbourne the next night) and a print of the reel was presented to the Prime Minister for permanent preservation to mark the occasion.

If there was a golden age in Australian newsreel production, it was now beginning, and though it would end in the fifties with the advent of television, for the next 20 years the rival Cinesound and Movietone reels would completely dominate the field. Films were the mass medium, and newsreels a vital means of communication. So if **Cinesound Review** styled itself as "The Voice of Australia", it wasn't an altogether idle boast.

Cinesound consolidated its position by absorbing the **Herald** reel in late 1932 - the **Review** was for many years thereafter released in Victoria as the **Herald Cinesound News Review** - and Ken Hall set about developing the reel's distinctive style. From the beginning there was an awareness that it couldn't depend solely on reporting of current events: there had to be a "magazine" component which would maintain audience appeal over the several weeks it was on circuit, and it helped if the news items themselves had some continuing value. Also it had to entertain - which was, after all, the reason paying audiences went to the films in the first place. Serious news had to be presented graphically, tightly, whereas the more light-hearted items could be enlivened with the use of a comedian (in one reel, for instance, Stan Tollhurst had trouble coping with a wet baby during a baby show).

Perhaps the **Review's** greatest asset was its commentator, Charles Lawrence, who was with the reel from its inception until a gradual retirement in the fifties. Lawrence's style has to be listened to rather than described. Familiar, colloquial, completely without pretension, and with a store of the corniest gags never far below the surface, it ensured that the **Review** never fell into the trap of taking itself too seriously - the "voice of God" approach sometimes used by overseas reels didn't work at Cinesound. Some sample lines convey the flavour: the title "Baby Born with 4-foot Neck" introduced a segment on giraffes; while an item on pygmy elephants acquired by Melbourne Zoo talks about "giant pachyderms" and "jungle mammoths" and ends (you can imagine the visuals) with: "We're sorry to see the end of Betty and Peggy, but excuse them, they've just had a trunk call. . ." And in a story about Northern Territory ant-hills in a 1938 **Review**, Lawrence reassured his audience that: "What we're passing is definitely not the graveyard of all the bad gags we pulled last year".

The reel's enthusiasm for comedy was to vanish in later years with Lawrence's - and later Hall's - departure from Cinesound. The subsequent narrators, with their more straightforward approaches, could never equal Lawrence's touch.

The earliest Movietone reels were without commentary because the recording of location sound (or location commentary) on the picture negative "as simply transferred, without change, to the release prints. Additional information was, therefore, conveyed by titles in the manner of silent newsreels. Quickly following their rival's lead, **Movietone** tried several commentators, eventually settling on Jack Davey who had been, when he joined the reel in 1935, a relatively unknown personality on Sydney's radio station 2GB. Davey and **Movietone** grew together over the next 25 years and his unexcelled ability as a comedian and compere lent itself well to newsreel work. A penchant for comedy was again in evidence, though perhaps more poised and less spontaneous than Lawrence's, but he was equally at home reporting serious news with drama and impact. Davey was also noted for his periodic, on-camera appearances: as Santa Claus in a Christmas reel and as a scout (or Girl Guide!) in a story on "Bob-a-job" week.

During the thirties both reels set up a network of representatives and cameramen in every state who contributed footage on a freelance basis, so that important events could be covered anywhere in the nation. Frequently, of course, both reels covered the same events - such as important sporting fixtures, overseas notables visiting Australia, natural disasters and so on indulging, as with the Melbourne Cup each year, in some well-publicised rivalry over who got their story on screen first. However, given the different character of each reel, the final results were often far from similar. Cinesound, for instance, felt no reticence in voicing an opinion on controversial issues, criticising government and public bodies on subjects ranging from Aboriginal welfare to drought and soil erosion. On one occasion, it characterised aspects of a post-war incident involving the deportation of Koreans as "un-Australian".

During World War II, the reels reached the peak of their efficiency and influence. Gradually the light-hearted and the inconsequential home news items gave way to reel after reel of graphic footage from the Australian cameramen in the

front lines: Frank Hurley, Damien Parer, Roy Driver, Bill Carty, and others. This was supplemented, for example, by stories on the war effort at home and explanations of why there was a need for emergency measures such as rationing. To a modern viewer, the tautness and compelling urgency of these reels conveys the tensions of those crucial years as nothing else can. And Cinesound Review No. 568 ("Kokoda Front Line- - photographed by Purer, written and produced by Hall) received the only Academy Award' ever presented to a newsreel. There could have been no finer accolade for the production standards which Australians had now reached in the Field.

During this period both reels reached larger audiences than they ever had before, or would again. And in addition to normal theatre screenings in Australia and New Zealand, the two companies compiled a joint reel (**News from Home**) comprising the best weekly items for screening to the Australian troops overseas. These reels, and footage from them, also found screen space in other Allied countries.

After the war, it was back to business as usual, and the reels emphasised the problems of rebuilding and rehabilitation, and the hopefulness of post-war economic expansion. There were new ideas, such as the introduction of colour (the bi-pack Solarchrome system) for some sponsored items in the **Cinesound Review**. And with the closure of feature production at Cinesound, there was also, perhaps, a growing awareness of the significance of the two weekly newsreels as steady employers, and a continuing reminder to theatre audiences that the local industry, if visibly contracting, was none the less still active.

Around 1948, a newcomer even briefly joined the field, the Perth based **Westralian News**, which was aimed at local audiences who were not seeing much of themselves in the Sydney produced reels. Though of good quality, the reel lacked the economic base and production facilities necessary for survival (sound recording and printing had to be done each week in Melbourne) and it quietly foundered before its First birthday.

The fifties brought television and the beginning of the decline of newsreels. The new medium decimated theatre audiences, and the grand movie palaces began to close in increasing numbers across the country. Television shared the newsreel's previously unique ability to present news visually and it had an immediacy which a newsreel could never match. Moreover, it was free, and quickly captured the mass audience for which the newsreels had catered for five decades.'

In December 1956, Ken Hall resigned from Cinesound to become a chief executive at TCN Channel 9 and, as Hall throughout his career had always retained personal supervision of the **Review**, it now lost his guiding hand and, in subsequent years, much of its flavour. Not long after, Jack Davey's death removed an essential part of the character of **Movietone News**. Both reels endeavoured, with some success, to recast themselves as cinemagazines and in spite of the increasingly unfavourable economics of their situation, there were innovations: in April 1961 Movietone released an all-colour, CinemaScope edition (on the Sydney Royal Easter Show), which it claimed as a world "first"; and in February 1968 Cinesound released its first all-colour edition of the **Review**.

The reels began gradually to diminish in length - from the full 10 or 11 minutes to six. To bolster the budget, there was an increasing reliance on items, and sometimes entire reels, clearly paid for by a sponsor, and - not surprisingly, perhaps, in view of the age of both reels - a growing preoccupation with recalling the past through the use of old footage. This resulted in some of the best (and worst) reels of the sixties and seventies; for instance, Bill Carty's outstanding **Symphony in Steel** for the **Review**.

In October 1970, with a brief announcement in the trade press but little else, the rival companies merged. **Movietone News** and **Cinesound Review** abruptly ceased and were replaced the following week by the new **Australian Movie Magazine** working out of Movietone's premises in Camperdown. Under Frank Killian and later, Harold Dews, the production of the reel was supervised by veteran newsreel man Sid Wood, who had first joined the infant Movietone unit in 1931.

In order to survive, the **Movie Magazine** needed to reverse the trend which brought it into being, winning an audience from a new generation of filmgoers raised on a tradition of television news reporting. Given its necessary strictures, that may have been an impossible task: Perhaps, simply, the change in cinemagoing habits has now made a weekly reel of any kind inappropriate.

And so the age of the newsreel passes.

The night after the closure of the reel, old hands from Cinesound and Movietone gathered at the Camperdown theatre. Ostensibly it was a farewell to Sid Wood on his retirement, but it was also a wake for the newsreel - and, for all the camaraderie, a sad occasion. Sid Wood's comment, on being presented with his retirement gift, is worth recording: "A newsreel cameraman has to learn to expect the unexpected - that's his business. When it happens, he just adapts to it and keeps going."

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And special thanks to the many individuals who provided information.

1. The print is in the film archives at the National Library, the only complete Herald reel now known to survive, and it was supplied with "full directions" for its safekeeping and preservation. Everyone's observed, in reporting the gift, that it was to be kept in official archives "forever - - which probably means until such time as another Labor Government comes to power".
2. It's still the only Oscar in Australia.
3. Both companies learned to exploit the new medium, at least temporarily, by producing TV series edited from their old footage: notably Movietone's **A Year to Remember** and **On This Day**.