

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Vitascope Hall**

Leland Stanford, founder of Stanford University, was an impressive figure. As president of the Central Pacific Railroad, he guided its construction over the mountains, building 530 miles in 293 days, and (as company head) he hammered in the famous golden spike in Promontory, Utah, on May 10, 1869. He was also instrumental in the creation of motion pictures.

In 1872 Stanford commissioned Eadweard Muybridge to employ newly invented photographic technology to determine whether a horse has all four feet off the ground at one time while galloping, which is true. Muybridge placed a continuous line of glass plate cameras along a race track, triggered by a series of trip wires set off in sequence as a horse thundered past. This experiment, which demonstrated movement through a series of still images viewed together, was a forerunner of motion picture technology. This phenomenon known as persistence of vision causes the brain to register a series of still images as continuous motion.

Thomas Edison and Muybridge talked about combining Edison's recorded sound with Muybridge's moving images. But Edison had different ideas. Instead of Muybridge's process using multiple cameras, Edison envisioned a single camera taking multiple sequential pictures. He filed a "patent caveat" in October 1888 for his pending invention, stating "This apparatus I call a kinetoscope, 'moving view' ..."

Edison and his assistant, Thomas Kennedy Laurie Dickson, successfully completed their goal the following year. By 1894, the first kinetoscope parlor opened on lower Broadway in New York. The kinetoscope devices allowed films to be viewed by one person at a time through a peephole window after putting a coin in the coin slot. Edison, whose company was also producing films for these devices, was doubtful of the kinetoscopes' commercial value and feared "that they will not earn their cost". Others quickly caught on to what Edison was too slow to

realize – that motion pictures would become even more profitable if projected on a large screen and shown to large paying audiences.

Charles Francis Jenkins was an inventor who made big strides in the development of motion picture projection. His patented projection process was called Phantoscope and cast images via film and electric light onto a screen or wall. The earliest documented projection of a filmed motion picture image was that of a vaudeville dancer presented to an audience in Richmond, Indiana, on June 6, 1894. The Eidoloscope projector was presented to the public in April the following year. Also in 1895, Thomas Armat got together with Jenkins to make modifications to the Phantoscope system and held a demonstration in Atlanta that Fall. The two soon parted ways, each claiming credit for the finished product.

In 1896 in Britain, Birt Acres and Robert W. Paul developed their own film projector, the Theatrograph (later known as the Animatograph) in January. Meanwhile, Armat pitched the Phantoscope to Raff and Gammon, the largest distributors of Edison's kinetoscopes. They were anxious to convert to a projection system, realizing that soon the kinetoscope process would be obsolete. The single-viewer films Edison was producing (such as cats with boxing gloves) were really the precursor of today's novel format: YouTube.

Raff and Gammon negotiated with Armat to purchase rights to the improved Phantoscope and then approached Thomas Edison. The Edison Manufacturing Company agreed to manufacture the projection device and produce films for it, but only on condition that it be marketed as Edison's own invention named the Vitascope. It was first publicly exhibited to much acclaim on April 23, 1896, at Koster and Bial's Music Hall, New York City.



*The Vitascope, advertised as Edison's Greatest Marvel in 1896*

The *New York Herald* reported the following day: "Wonderful is The Vitascope. Pictures life size and full of color. Makes a thrilling show."

Very soon after, the Vitascope came to New Orleans. The first film shown in the Crescent City was on a large outdoor canvas screen at West End by the lakefront (unrolled in front of the bandstand) on June 28, 1896, by Allen B. Blakemore, an electrical engineer for the New Orleans City and Lake Railroad. He had the know-how to rig up Armat and Edison's projection system. Blakemore reduced the five-hundred-volt current from the trolley line for his "Wonderful Vitascope" machine by way of a water rheostat. He also set up a small, square booth six feet above the decking of the resort to house the projector, and an old-time circus man named Billy Reed cranked out the first flicks.

On July 26, 1896, the first permanent theater in the United States dedicated exclusively to showing motion pictures was William "Pop" Rock's Vitascope Hall at 623 Canal Street in New Orleans.

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# Vitascope Hall,

623 CANAL STREET.

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## THE VITASCOPE

Is no longer at the WEST END, but is now at the above, where daily exhibitions will be given with an entirely new series of pictures.

**See Niagara Falls and Shooting the Chutes.**

From 10 a. m. till 3 p. m. and from 8 p. m. till 10 p. m.

**AFTER BREAKFAST VISIT THE VITASCOPE.**

**ADMISSION . . . . . 10 CENTS.**

**WAINWRIGHT & ROCK,**

**SOLE OWNERS AND MANAGERS.**

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*Daily Picayune advertisement, New Orleans, July 31, 1896*

Vitascope Hall was located on the corner of Canal Street and Exchange Alley, and admission was ten cents. The first movie house in the

United States, it only slightly preceded the city's first silent film studios.



*623 Canal Street, site of the first movie theater in the U.S.*

Siegmund Lubin was an early motion picture pioneer who purchased a Jenkins camera. He took his first moving pictures of his horse eating hay. He visited "Pop" Rock's Vitascope Theater in New Orleans and in 1896 began distributing films for Edison, including the first screen kiss between Canadian actress May Irwin and John Rice. Entitled "The Kiss", short films like this were extremely popular at Vitascope Hall.

1896 was a leap year and whether or not the lady in "The Kiss" took the osculation initiative is for the viewer to ascertain.

By the end of that year, November 1896, Edison's company developed its own projection device known as the Projecting Kinetoscope or Projectoscope and abandoned marketing the Vitascope.

On October 16, 2007, a headline read: "BUFFALO, NEW YORK CELEBRATES 111th BIRTHDAY OF WORLD'S FIRST MOVIE THEATER".

The article read: "BUFFALO, NEW YORK, USA. October 19, 2007 is the 111th anniversary of the opening of the first permanent, purpose-built movie theater in the world: the Vitascope Hall which opened on Monday, October 19, 1896 in the Ellicott Square Building on Main Street."

Sorry, Buffalo. New Orleans' "Vitascope Hall" opened almost four months before yours.

## **NED HÉMARD**

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