50 YEARS OF SHOW BUSINESS
(From Silents to Sound)
By George Parkes

My father was born at Walsall in England. When his father was killed by accident Dad went to work in the mine at an early age to help keep the family of four. Later, when the family decided to come to Australia and settle here, they came by ship which took weeks for the journey. Dad married an Australian girl from Woonona on the South Coast of N.S.W., where they had four children, three girls and me. At this time, he was working at a South Coast colliery. Unfortunately, the three girls died, two at an early age and the eldest at thirty, leaving me the sole survivor.

We lived at Corrimal and I attended the local public school, then went on to become a first year student at Wollongong High School. After the second year I left school and worked at the local colliery for twelve months. I then decided to try to get work in the city of Sydney. Being fortunate to get a position as a clerk handling despatch and customs work, I became interested in the picture theatre business as an exhibitor.

The 1914-18 war had ended and a friend and I decided to screen films in the Balgownie School of Arts. Sickness compelled my partner to terminate his interest so I carried on alone for a few years until I took over the picture business at Portland, 16 miles from Lithgow, on the Mudgee line, a town known for the large cement works, probably at the time the largest in the state. Portland then had a population of between 4-6000 people and two theatres controlled by myself. The Crystal and the Majestic in 1923 were not modern by today's standards, but about 1925 the Crystal was razed to the ground. A new brick building was then erected comprising of a theatre with dress circle and total seating for 800 people, flats and two shops (one used for a bank). The Majestic theatre became a venue for dances and other functions.

In 1928 I sold my interest in Portland and returned to the South Coast, then in 1929 I leased the Whiteway theatre at Port Kembla. At this time a new phase had entered the picture show business: the silent film had gained a voice and so “Talkies” were born. We were one of the first to install the new medium and opened with the “Black Watch” (one of the first all-talking pictures) in November 1929. It was this year on Christmas Eve I married a Mt. Kembla girl. This town will be remembered for the mine explosion in July 1902, 96 miners being killed.

The “Talkies” had made the following years busy but in 1932 a depressed state of business conditions struck everywhere; work became scarce and some people were working part-time which meant they could not attend the cinema so often because the smaller earnings had to be used to keep the home going.

About 1938 we built a theatre at Dapto which replaced our screenings at the agricultural hall.

In 1939-1945 Australia was at war and there was greater activity, firms became busy and the cinema became a “reserved” occupation to enable theatres to remain open to maintain the morale of the people.

In 1942 I left Port Kembla to control our own theatre at Dapto because during the war years we had two army camps stationed
there and we were busy screening special films for the troops in addition to our usual screenings.

Once weekly screenings were also held at Albion Park and Shellharbour where there were troops stationed. It was at the latter place that a ship "City of Services Boston," one of a convoy of ships, ran aground at Bass Point. Despite heavy weather and rough seas all personnel were saved, but four men lost their lives during hectic rescue operations. A memorial at Bass Point records their bravery.

At this time we were busy entertaining the troops and on one occasion, standing outside the theatre at Dapto at night, we noticed a plane flying low and heard later it had come down with tragic results, four men being killed.

After the war, came the "Cinemascope," or big picture, over twice the size of the ordinary film, the first one being "The Robe."

In 1948 the three theatres were taken over by Wollongong Theatres Ltd., who at the time were controlling six other South Coast theatres.

Picton, a town 30 miles west of Wollongong, was our next venture. It was situated between Camden and Bowral on the Sydney/Melbourne highway. It was during this time we were having electricity black-outs so we put a generating plant on a lorry and produced our own power for the theatre, also using the plant at Dapto, which meant we were able to keep both theatres operating on different nights of screenings.

Whilst at Picton and having two spare plants, we began screenings at Thirlmere and The Oaks. The former town produced poultry and eggs and the latter town, on the way to Burragorang Valley, was a coal mining centre. Two successive years presented transport difficulties. We were living in Wollongong, and one year floods created problems and the next year bush fires caused us a lot of worry trying to get to our destination. On one occasion the road on Razorback between Camden and Picton was washed away and we were forced to leave the lorry in a paddock. We walked back to Picton in the rain, leaving people at The Oaks without a screening on that night and of course it happened when we had a special attraction.

After nine years at Picton we returned to the Coast and purchased the Empire Theatre at Helensburgh (now a supermarket) where we remained for ten years.

Then came problems for the picture theatre business. In 1956 we were faced with the opposition of television, which meant that people could have picture screenings in their own home. The first impact was greatly felt and attendances at the theatres were reduced.

On the personal side my wife's health was not so good so we disposed of the theatre.

After a spell from business we returned to the theatre, taking over the Kiama Cinema, which we controlled for six years before retiring and residing in Wollongong.

Following a long illness, my wife passed away in 1976. We had been married nearly 50 years.

After screening hundreds of films, I consider the two best were "Gone With The Wind" for production and for appeal "A Man Called Peter."