

Mystery of the Magic Lantern

George Matheson travels back in time with the rediscovery of a forgotten family heirloom



George Matheson's *Magic Lantern* (Photo by Author)

bulb. The light from it would be shone through a glass slide and a large and heavy brass lens with two knobs for rack and pinion focusing, onto a wall or screen where an image would 'magically' emerge.

Lanterns, like the one I was researching, relied on kerosene or paraffin to give off light. But the light source was limited; a more intense light was required if the images were to be seen in a large hall by curious theatre goers. So it was to limestone that professional showmen turned. When heated by an oxyhydrogen flame, the lime would become sufficiently incandescent to produce a light strong enough to project an image over some distance in a theatre. (It's interesting to note that lime was a common way of illuminating the pre-electric stage in theaters, hence the reference to someone "being in the limelight".)

By the mid-1800s, the popularity of lanterns had spread and they had come to be available in forms ranging from toy lanterns for children, to complicated multi-lens apparatuses that fed the public's appetite for entertainment and excitement.

One of the most famous (or infamous) of these theatrical presentations had been the "Phantasmagoria", an elaborate

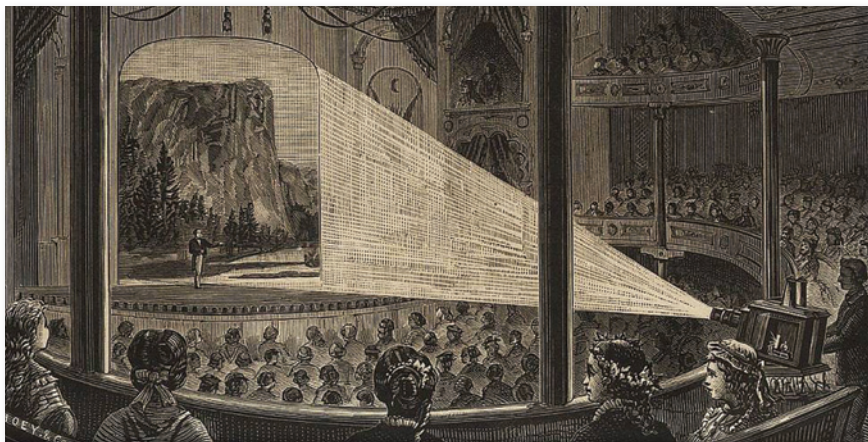
A heavy wooden box sat in the attic of the family home. It had been there for as far back as I can remember and, since the 1960s, I had been aware that inside the box was an elaborate instrument of mahogany, steel, brass and glass called a **Magic Lantern**. But I had no idea of where it had come from, how my ancestors had used it, or even how it worked. So, to discover what it could tell me about my family history I needed, first, to learn something about magic lanterns.

Internet searching uncovered a

wealth of material – books, articles, societies, conferences, museum exhibits and even shows.

Magic **Lanterns** inspire ongoing fascination, in part, because of their rich history. They were invented in the 1660s by the Dutch mathematician and astronomer, Christiaan Huygens (1629-1695,) as a special tool for education and research.

Much like a primitive version of the slide projector that would become popular in the mid-1900s, it relied on a light source, at first a candle or kerosene lamp and eventually an electric light



Engraving of a *Magic Lantern Show* circa 1900. (Public domain)

ghost show that swept Europe in the first half of the 19th century. Developed by the Belgian showman, Étienne-Gaspard Robert, several lanterns were simultaneously employed along with smoke, fog, thunder sounds and supernatural noises to scare the audience into believing that demons, monsters, skeletons and evil spirits were moving about the room.

By the later decades of the 19th century, *magic-lanterns* had outgrown this notoriety. They were to be found in schools, churches, social organizations and fraternal lodges. And, by the turn of the 20th century they had become popular for home-use by a growing middle class.

This was precisely the time when my great-grandfather, James Loney, was moving up in the world. Since arriving in Canada from Guernsey as a poor butcher, he'd shifted into real estate and become part of the established middle class. From what I'd learned about him from letters, diaries and other materials, he was inclined toward the acquisition of such modern/trendy items. He would have been the only family member who could have afforded to purchase a magic lantern.

Drawing my attention back to the magic lantern in the attic, I noticed a brass plate on the front that identified the manufacturer as W. Watson and Son of 313 High Holborn, London. The inscribed serial number (No.286) dated it to 1900.

My research into W. Watson & Sons revealed that this company was a well-known optician and scientific instrument maker that marketed lanterns internationally through mail-order catalogues and was shipping to many locations – including Toronto where James lived. With reasonable certainty I was able to conclude that the lantern had been purchased by him.

W. Watson & Sons was also a major producer of glass slides which would have been available for purchase in Toronto through



Lantern's *Brass Plate*. (Photo by Author)

their mail order catalogues as well as from several, then flourishing, local producers. These slides, usually a 3¼ inch piece of glass, were sold in boxes as blanks or with hand drawn (or painted) images. As photographic methods improved and the market grew, the slides came to be commercially produced and often sold as thematic sets that served as travelogues, depictions of historical events or illustrations of stories.

I had come across many such slides in the attic. And it was through sorting, and researching, these that I was able to get a sense of how my ancestors had enjoyed their magic lantern.

After setting aside the blanks, I sorted more than 200 image slides into categories. As I did so, four piles, each of 8 to 10 slides, stood out. They looked like they would, if put in sequence, tell a story. One slide in each of these piles appeared to have a title printed on it. A search of these led me to narrative poems which, in turn, enabled me to put the slides into sequence and, then look into the literary history of each of these thematic sets.

For instance, one set entitled "*The Fireman's Wedding*", illustrated a story as told in a narrative poem by an English poet W. A. Eaton who was well-known through recitations of his poems to audiences at magic lantern shows in London. This poem, considered to be Eaton's "poetic masterpiece", had, by 1898, sold 124,000 printed copies and thousands of slide sets were in circulation. It tells the story of a fireman rescuing a woman from a burning building and later marrying her. It's dramatic and romantic – and the slides illustrating it are strikingly colourful. It was among the best sellers



LEFT: Slide from *The Fireman's Wedding*. (Photo by Author) RIGHT: Slide of Clifford Loney as "A Good Fisher of Men". (Photo by Author)

when James purchased his magic lantern and likely had been purchased by him at the same time.

It may well have been one of the first shows that James' put on for the family reciting a stanza of the poem as he showed each slide. With mounting excitement in the room, my ancestors might well have responded with applause as he put in the final slide and read the closing lines:

*"Stand back, lads! Stand back!
Here they are!*

*We'll give them the cheer that we
promised,*

Now, lads, with a hip, hip, hurrah!

The novelty, however, was to come to an abrupt end as magic lantern shows quickly gave way to "moving picture shows" and a rapidly advancing cinematic technology. Interests would move

with the times and, within a few short years, families were putting aside their lanterns.

If it hadn't been for my grandfather, Clifford Loney, the eldest of James' six children, James' lantern would likely have left no trace in my family history. But Clifford, living at home at the time, could see a use for it.

In church circles, magic lanterns were still popular, being widely used to bring bible stories to life in Sunday Schools, illustrate biblical teachings, show words of hymns and Bible verses to congregations and inspire missionary work.

Clifford graduated from Toronto Bible College in 1905, completed his theological training in 1908 and went on to begin 60 years as a dynamic preacher who could always draw the crowds. One of

the glass slides, with a photo of him, identifies him as "A Good Fisher of Men".

His "fingerprints" were on more than half of the remaining slides including thirty-six about Dispensational Theology, an esoteric topic that was a dominant theme in his preaching. A further sixteen were bible verses etched in Clifford's handwriting, another 16 were hymns and dozens more illustrated popular bible stories.

On the frame of many slides was a stamp indicating that they had been produced by Charles Potter, an established optician and instrument maker in Toronto, Ontario.

In business directories of the time, Potter had advertised his glass slides for "academic, commercial and religious purposes"

with churches, seminaries, missionary organizations and social reform movements being his best customers. Many of these slides were found in boxes stamped “Property of Stanley Avenue Baptist Church” where Clifford was the minister from 1915 to 1962.

However, times were changing again and by the late 1910s, these markets too were drying up. Magic lanterns and their slides were becoming artifacts of the past. In 1917, Clifford moved into the house that was to become “the family home” and shortly after the box containing the magic lantern was placed in a corner of the attic – to rest there undisturbed and unused for the next century.

Having solved the mystery of my magic lantern, one question remained: what to do with it now. In all the time I had spent researching the topic I had come across only one article about a magic lantern in the context of family history. (“*The Magic Lantern: A Family History*” by John Carter Borton, Jr., *The Magic Lantern Bulletin*, Spring 1982). The author, a modern-day “Lanternist”, chronicles how his great-grandfather’s magic lantern had been passed down through successive generations to not only be admired but also used to put on magic lantern shows. He discusses



George Matheson, his son, Lauren, and the grandchildren watching a **Magic Lantern Show** in 2019. (Photo by Donna Matheson)

the integral role that the lantern played in his own upbringing and the strong effect that an actual magic lantern show can have on its audience.

An answer to the question of what to do with the lantern is to “use it”. As I had explored how James and, then, Clifford had used their lantern, I had learned enough about how lanterns work to try my hand at putting on a show for my family.

In our modern technological world of iPhones, PowerPoint and Virtual Reality, it was difficult to predict what might be

gained from the experience. When the family visited one weekend, we climbed up to the attic, gathered some slides including *A Fireman’s Wedding*, loaded up the lamp with paraffin, dusted off the lens, lit the wick and watched a show.

In those moments, suspended in time, it was as if six generations, spanning from James my great grandfather to my own grandchildren, were gathered together sharing “*the magic of another time*”.

That experience serves as a reminder that, while genealogical research may be about coming to know ancestors, it is also about bringing (and keeping) the past alive for future generations.



USEFUL SOURCES

Magic Lantern Research Group. This group provides resources for research on magic lanterns, optical projection, pre-cinema history, the phantasmagoria, and related topics, www.zotero.org/groups/33135/magic_lantern_research_group?

The Magic Lantern Society of the United States and Canada, www.magiclanternsociety.org

LUCERNA – the Magic Lantern Web Resource, <http://lucerna.exeter.ac.uk>

A compendium of Magic Lantern slides, www.luikerwaal.com/newframe_uk.htm?/inh_platen_uk.htm



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