

The Vitascope in Canada

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THE VITASCOPE COMES TO TORONTO

The following is an excerpt from Chapter III of Magic Moments: First 20 Years of Moving Pictures in Toronto (1894-1914).

The machinery for the Vitascope [Fig. 1] arrived by express today, the first exhibition in Canada of this latest marvel [but not the *first* exhibition of projected moving pictures in Canada ⁽¹⁾] of Edison's will be given at [Ottawa's] West End Park on Monday night." ⁽²⁾

The sole right for exhibiting the *Vitascope* in Canada was secured by the Holland brothers ⁽³⁾ [Fig. 2], of Ottawa, as agents for Raff and Gammon, the American *Vitascope* promoters. The scheme devised for marketing called for the selling of franchises of Thomas Armat's *Vitascope* (not *Edison's*, since Armat had allowed Raff and Gammon to use the Edison label strictly for commercial expediency). For an initial advance payment, an agent [read here, *the Holland brothers*] could purchase the exclusive rights to the *Vitascope* for a state or group of states giving the person [or persons] the right to lease projectors (for US \$25 to \$50 monthly per machine) and buy, *of course*, Edison films. The manner and location of the exhibitions were left entirely to the franchise holder. Agents could exploit the *Vitascope* themselves, or, as Raff and Gammon repeatedly pointed out in their correspondence, the territories could be further divided or sub-franchised.⁽⁴⁾

The exhibition in Ottawa, as with many early moving picture exhibitions, was part of a magic show bill. John C. Green, the magician at Ottawa's park, did a thirty-minute magic show and described the moving pictures on the screen.⁽⁵⁾ However, this was not the case in Toronto, for the films there were neither seen out of doors nor did they share the bill with a magic act; but, they did share attention with a sort of "magic," namely, Professor Roentgen's great X-rays, as well as several vaudeville acts [Fig. 3].

The *Vitascope* headed the bill for the re-opening of Robinson's Musee Theatre at No. 91 Yonge Street. It was Marion S. Robinson, of Buffalo, New York, who had originally built the Musee in 1890:

Something new in the line of amusements will be opened to the Toronto public on Wednesday next. The buildings at 91 and 93 Yonge street have been fitted up for Robinson's Musee Theatre. The entrance leads to the second floor, on which is a large hall containing wax works and tableaux, on the third floor is the art gallery, stereopticon views and curio halls, and on the fourth or top floor is the menagerie of living wild animals, aquarium and aviary. From the top floor the public will pass downstairs in the rear of the building to the theatre on the ground floor. The hall is being fitted handsomely and will have seating capacity for several hundred people... The theatrical attractions will be of high order and will be kept free from anything of objectionable character.⁽⁶⁾

The projected opening date of October 15, was somewhat optimistic, for Robinson's Musee Theatre did not open its doors to the public until Monday, December 8, 1890, after a special reception on Saturday, December 6:

On Monday at 1 o'clock Robinson's magnificent new Musee Theatre, at Nos. 90 [sic] and 91 (just north of King), Yonge-street, will be thrown open to the public. Manager Robinson intends to signalize the grand event by holding a reception this evening [Saturday], to which Mayor Clarke, the aldermen and a large number of prominent citizens have been invited.⁽⁷⁾

For some reason, toward the end of Robinson's first season negotiations took place between himself and James H. Moore of Detroit, Michigan, to sell his Yonge-street establishment.⁽⁸⁾ Moore became proprietor and manager during the Musee's closing weeks of June 29 to July 24, 1891. He soon announced the re-opening under the name *J. H. Moore's Musee Theatre* [Fig. 4] for Monday, August 24, after alterations: The Musee Theatre has undergone a transformation during the close which will surprise the patrons at the opening on Monday. The appointments are in every way more handsome than they were, and the Musee

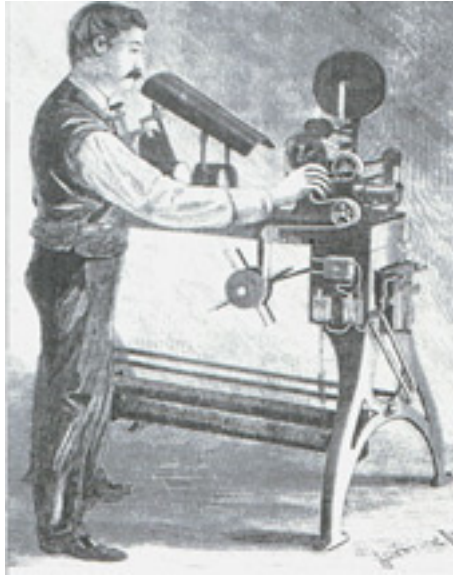


Figure 1: Fig. 1: Thomas Armat's Vitascope

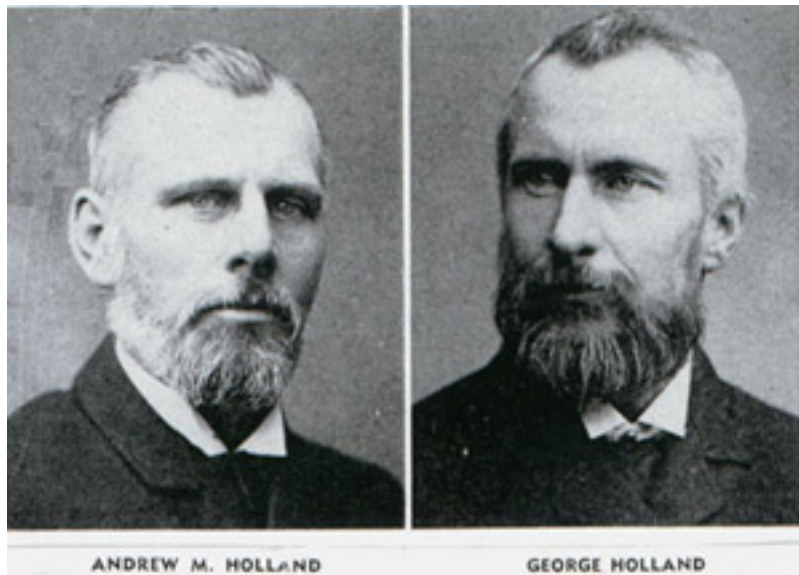


Figure 2: Fig. 2: The Holland brothers of Ottawa were responsible for bringing the Vitascope to Toronto

is indeed a pretty place. Manager Moore has not only spent a lot of money on decorations for his popular house, but he has arranged to give the people of Toronto a line of amusement better than any ever before given here.⁽⁹⁾

In April of 1895, "the Musee property was purchased from its American proprietors by Mr. S.S. Young, a Canadian,"⁽¹⁰⁾ who being manager for a while at the Musee,⁽¹¹⁾ must have been familiar with its operation. The official opening of his Crystal Theatre and Eden Museum occurred on Labour Day, September 2, 1895:

The work of reconstruction has been very extensive. The foyer has been rebuilt, and projected several feet nearer the sidewalk... The theatre has been entirely overhauled and repaired... the ceiling elevated, the balcony enlarged, and new electric lights put in.⁽¹²⁾

The lecture hall on the third floor was named the Eden Musee Theatorium,⁽¹³⁾ from which patrons could still "pass down to the Crystal theatre by a separate stairway, thus avoiding the crush and crowds at the main stairway."⁽¹⁴⁾ The *Globe* noted with importance: "The Crystal Theatre is this year a completely Canadian enterprise, and should meet with hearty support from the Canadian public."⁽¹⁵⁾



Figure 3: Fig. 3: Armat's Vitascope was the first machine to project moving pictures in Toronto (*Evening News*, August 29, 1896)

But, after having managed not only his own theatre but also the Lyceum Theatre, in Buffalo, for a brief period, M. S. Robinson re-established himself at the Yonge-street Musee in mid-1896: Workmen are busy now renovating the Theatre Musee on Yonge-street; and the place will be re-opened next Monday. Mr. Robinson, who first conducted the Musee in Toronto, again controls it and he wishes the public to thoroughly understand that the many objectionable features of last year's management have been entirely eliminated and that this season what should be the most popular amusement resort in Toronto will be conducted on entirely different principles. Mr. Robinson says that... those who have since had it in hand have not been successful as they might have been. This he attributes to the fact that they did not understand the community to be catered to in Toronto.

Under the present management, strenuous efforts will be made to get the dime museum idea out of the public mind and to put on first-class novelties and people that will tend to elevate instead of degrade. ... As far as possible Mr. Robinson will try and make everything in connection with the performances educational. As Mr. Robinson put it, "It will introduce new ideas, new and novel features, and nothing cheap except the prices."⁽¹⁶⁾

Most of the Toronto newspapers⁽¹⁷⁾ praised Robinson for his good taste, but very few offered space to the initial impact of the *Vitascope*, except for the *Toronto World*: In Edison's latest wonder, the vitascope, there

is the scientific combined with the amusing. This machine projects apparently living figures and scenes on a canvas screen before the audience. It baffles analysis, and because of its wonderful simulation of human beings in action delights immense audiences. ⁽¹⁸⁾

Edward Houghton, whose name appeared on the opening bill [Fig. 3], was sent by Robinson apparently to "put in the kinetoscope [sic],"⁽¹⁹⁾ as stated in his 1933-interview with a *Mail and Empire* reporter. But, there seems to be some confusion among researchers as to just *where* Houghton had installed the machine in the building which consisted of "departments" to which Robinson referred as: the *Theatre* (on ground level) and the *Eden Musee* (or *museum*), consisting of probably an *Art Gallery* on the second floor (Young's wax work rooms), the *Music Hall*, or old lecture room—"seats having been placed around the old lecture hall,"⁽²⁰⁾ on the third floor, which S. S. Young called the *Eden Musee Theatorium* [See note 13, above], and the *Menagerie* on the fourth or top floor. According to Houghton, from his interview, he placed the *Vitascope* "downstairs,"⁽²¹⁾ which has led some researchers to conclude that the first *projected* moving pictures in Toronto were exhibited in a *basement*.⁽²²⁾ Yes, they were presented "downstairs," but this did not mean the cellar or basement. In order to solve this error, we must return to 1890 when the Musee occupied not only 91 Yonge, but also 93. But, under Moore's management, the Musee was "to be completely overhauled,"⁽²³⁾ in 1891.

This probably meant the loss of part of No. 93, since the street-level front property of No. 93 Yonge was to be occupied by a series of small businesses beginning c.1891. By 1896, it was occupied by John Hall, gent's furnishings. Remember in 1890 that: "The main entrance is at the south door [i.e. at No. 91], and the visitor goes up a wide stairway to the left...Going down again to the ground floor by a different staircase, the visitor is in the theatre..."⁽²⁴⁾ In 1894, Moore had a new entrance created, which was of such importance that it received prominence in a September ad: "Persons wishing to visit the theatre without *first* [my italics] going upstairs can do so by way of the NEW THEATRE ENTRANCE."⁽²⁵⁾ However, despite this announcement, the practice of entering the theatre from the upper floors appeared to continue as evidenced by an article in the *Toronto World*, which stated in part: "There will be no crowding *down to* [my italics] the theatre, as any patron of the house can go down the theatre stairway when he likes..."⁽²⁶⁾ In conclusion, when Houghton used the word "downstairs," he really meant: *Down the stairs to the theatre on the ground floor.*

Peter Morris, who made the assumption about the motion pictures being shown in a basement, further errors in his book *Embattled Shadows* when he writes: "As a measure of the movie's status as a novelty, it is curious to note that a demonstration of Professor Roentgen's X-rays commanded a higher admission price (twenty-five cents) and enjoyed a more prominent location in the lobby of the Bijou Theatre where the stage was occupied by the best touring attractions."⁽²⁷⁾ The first error occurs in the admission price, for ads and newspaper reports of the time in question stated an admission of "ten and fifteen cents."⁽²⁸⁾ In fact, there was no mention of twenty-five cents anywhere!

The next error: The X-rays were not demonstrated in the lobby but rather in the Music Hall, or old lecture room, on the third floor (See note 20, above): In the Music Hall, the Hearon Ladies' Orchestra play in excellent style selections of popular music and Prof. O'Reilly gives an illustrated exhibition of the Rontgen [sic] ray phenomena.⁽²⁹⁾

In addition, the *Daily Mail and Empire* stated: "Upstairs is the X rays apparatus."⁽³⁰⁾ As the Music Hall was not *the theatre*, even though it had a stage, the vaudeville acts, of which the *Vitascope* was but one, would have been presented in the theatre on street-level: In the cosy little theatre a capital variety bill is given... A fascinating feature of the show was the exhibition of Edison's Vitascope, the remarkable realistic scenes of which must be seen to be appreciated.⁽³¹⁾

Morris' third error occurs in his suggestion that the movies were of low status; yet, every ad, such as the one in Fig. 3, billed the *Vitascope* higher than the X-rays, and furthermore, newspaper reports allotted greater space to the projector. Surely, these, plus the fact that the *Vitascope* remained at the Musee one week longer than the X-rays, suggest a higher status for the movies than Morris insinuates.

His final error occurs in his misuse of the Musee's name. He refers to it as the "Bijou" rather than Robinson's Musee Theatre. Only after November 16, 1896, was the name changed to the Bijou⁽³²⁾ [Fig. 5].

What subjects were projected at Robinson's from August 31 to October 10, 1896? The first series *may* have included the following: *Shooting The Chutes at Coney Island*, *The Black Diamond Express* (a locomotive),

and *The Kiss*-featuring Mae Irwin and John Rice (whom Houghton, by the way, incorrectly named John Cohn, in his 1933-interview). Projected, for sure, was La Loie Fuller doing *Butterfly Dance*, the hand-coloured version:

One of the prettiest and most realistic scenes in the vitascope exhibition at Robinson's Musee is a reproduction of a serpentine dance, "A La Loie Fuller." The representation of the dance seems as perfect as if the dancer were actually before the audience. The changing lights in the draperies are reproduced in all their vividness [suggesting colour, no doubt] and variety.⁽³³⁾



Figure 4: Fig. 4: The arrow indicates 91 Yonge St., c. 1894. The building to the immediate left is No. 93. Both formed Moore's Musee theatre.

From September 21 to 26, the first Canadian scenes to be exhibited were *Cataracts of Niagara Falls* and *Whirlpool Rapids*,⁽³⁴⁾ the latter being the only film retained for the following week's set of pictures.⁽³⁵⁾ Some moving pictures during this week were "new colored views,"⁽³⁶⁾ again meaning they were hand-painted.

"Nothing seen in Toronto in the past has created more interest than "Edison's Vitascope" and the "X Rays" and the demand to see these truly wonderful inventions has induced the management to retain them indefinitely," reported the *Evening News*.⁽³⁷⁾ Why then, was the *Vitascope* not retained; why did it not return to Toronto after it closed at Robinson's on October 10. Firstly, there was competition from new machines, such as the Lumière *Cinématographe*, the *Animatograph* and the *Kinematographe*. Secondly, there was the matter of a poor marketing strategy: *Vitascope* bookings clashed with vaudeville inter-state circuit building;⁽³⁸⁾ Raff and Gammon made commitments to agents on delivery of the projector but had no control-Edison did! ⁽³⁹⁾ Thirdly, there was the problem that the *Vitascope* required direct current in a time of incompatible systems,⁽⁴⁰⁾ whereas the three machines cited above needed no electrical current for either driving the film or powering the light source; all were hand-cranked, and used gases or limelight for illuminant. Even Andrew Holland complained of this matter, in writing, to Norman Raff:

If the small towns of the continent [i.e. the Maritime provinces] are to be worked, a radical change will have to be made in the construction of the machine so that exhibitions can be utterly independent of electrical power companies.⁽⁴¹⁾

Fourthly, the *Vitascope* required a trained projectionist which was a definite handicap. Finally, the films which its chief rival, the *Cinematographe*, offered were of a wider range of subjects. The Lumiere apparatus was not only a projector, but also a camera, and even a printer, thus permitting filming of the locale in which it was projecting, and then thrilling the natives by including these as part of the programme.

"It was a race from the first," recounted Houghton during his 1933-interview, "because a Frenchman, I think,

Loumiere [sic], was opening the cinematograph across the street in an empty store; ...we opened the same day and I think we beat him by a few minutes with our first pictures.”⁽⁴²⁾ Good drama, yes, but not quite accurate, as will be shown in Chapter V. True, the *Cinematographe* competed with the *Vitascope* in Toronto, but perhaps not to the point, as Houghton expressed it, that ”old timers remember the excitement.”⁽⁴³⁾



Figure 5: Fig. 5: Robinson’s Bijou theatre, formerly Roobinson’s Musee theatre is at the extreme right as it appeared in April 1897.

Notes

1. Andre Gaudreault and Germain Lacasse ”The Introduction of the Lumiere Cinematograph in Canada,” in *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, Vol. 5 No. 2, p. 117.
2. *Ottawa Citizen*, July 20, 1896, p. 8.
3. Ibid.
4. Robert C. Allen ”Vitascope/Cinematographe: Initial Patterns of American Film Industrial Practices,” in *Film Before Griffith*, ed. by John Fell (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983) pp. 146-147.
5. *Canadian Film Weekly* 1951, p. 25.
6. *Globe*, Dec. 1, 1890, p. 8.
7. *Toronto World*, Dec. 6, 1890.
8. Ibid, July 1, 1891, p. 8.
9. *Evening News*, Aug. 22, 1891, p. 1.
10. *Daily Mail and Empire*, Aug. 24, 1895, p. 10.
11. *Toronto World*, Jan. 29, 1895, p. 3, refers to Mr. Young: ”Manager Young last night had a full house at the Musee.”
12. *Globe*, Aug. 31, 1895, p. 17.
13. Ibid.

14. *Daily Mail and Empire*, Aug. 24, 1895, p. 10.
15. *Globe*, Aug. 31, 1895, p. 17.
16. *Toronto World*, Aug. 29, 1896, p. 2.
17. *Daily Mail and Empire*, Sept. 1, 1896, p. 10; *Toronto World*, Sept. 1, 1896, p. 4; *Evening News*, Sept. 11, 1896, p. 2. 18. *Toronto World*, Sept. 1, 1896, p. 4.
18. *Toronto World*, Sept. 1, 1896, p. 4.
19. *Toronto Mail and Empire*, July 22, 1933, p. 1. Edward Houghton's error in identification of the machine was only one of several made by him in his interview; but, it must be remembered that he was recalling events which took place some thirty-seven years earlier.
20. *Toronto World*, Aug. 29, 1896, p. 2.
21. *Toronto Mail and Empire*, July 22, 1933, p. 1.
22. Peter Morris, in *Embattled Shadows* (McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 1978) p. 8. Mike Filey, too, in his article for *The Sunday Sun*, April 26, 1981, S21, when he wrote: "The newly opened Robinson's Musee installed a kinoscope, a rudimentary form of movie projector, in the basement and for 10 cents the visitor could go to the movies." Note, also, that Filey used Houghton's incorrect name, "kinoscope," instead of Vitascope. In fact these were two quite different machines!
23. *Globe*, July 1, 1891, p. 8.
24. *Evening News*, Dec. 8, 1890, p. 1.
25. *Daily Mail and Empire*, Sept. 1, 1894, p. 7.
26. *Toronto World*, Aug. 29, 1896, p. 2.
27. Morris, *Embattled Shadows*, p. 8.
28. *Star*, Aug. 31, 1896, p. 2; *Evening News*, Sept. 5, 1896, p. 8; *Globe*, Sept. 2, 1896, p. 2.
29. *Globe*, Sept. 1, 1896, p. 2.
30. *Daily Mail and Empire*, Sept. 5, 1896, p. 8.
31. Ibid.
32. *Globe*, Nov. 12, 1896, p. 12 and Nov. 17, 1896, p. 5; *Toronto World*, Nov. 12, 1896, p. 3.
33. *Mail and Empire*, Sept. 19, 1896.
34. *Evening Star*, Sept. 19, 1896, p. 2.
35. *Evening News*, Sept. 29, 1896, p. 2.
36. Ibid, Sept. 19, 1896, p. 3.
37. Ibid, Sept. 11, 1896, p. 2.
38. Allen, "Vitascope / Cinematographe," in *Film Before Griffith*, p. 149.
39. Ibid. 40. Ibid.
41. Ibid, footnote 21: "A. Holland to Norman Raff, September 9, 1896 (R-G)."
42. *Mail and Empire*, July 22, 1933, p. 1; (Houghton interview).
43. Ibid.

Author Information

Robert W. GUTTERIDGE is a life-long teacher and producer of educational, travel and experimental films. He has been collecting motion picture apparatus for the past twenty-five years. His book *First 20 Years of Moving Pictures in Toronto (1894-1914)* is due to be released in 1999.