

The Collectors who Saved Cinema

"He was the epitome of film buffery," Dave declared. Before he died in 1989 at the age of 76, Jack would often call in and see Dave for a chat about films, and they would show a few in Dave's home cinema. Good days remembered.

Two film buffs watching what the reels magically rolled out for them. Dave paid tribute to Jack's devotion to film collecting, not to mention the cards and books and anything else associated with the screen industry through the years. "Jack loved film and he loved to put on a show," Dave said, describing him as "the face behind the small glass window high up on the back wall of the State Theatre in Hastings."

Jack Murtagh was the projectionist there between 1959 and 1984 or 25 years, which, appropriately, is a silver anniversary. He was seldom seen by the patrons, but most knew Jack was there and on the job because his presentation was superb. No one else put on a show like Jack and for him presentation was paramount. The dimming of the lights and his prelude music created an atmosphere of anticipation. It was like magic.

The audience would sit silently and enjoy the build-up to the beginning of the film. Then, with his imaginative lighting and the prelude concluded, the monarch of the empire would regally light up the screen, followed by the familiar opening bars of God Save the Queen, a tune the audiences would then reflect upon while of course in a respectful standing position. Yes, it would be more than fair and fitting to say that Jack Murtagh enjoyed a good film. Equally fair and fitting to add that when he worked as a projectionist he also enjoyed not only watching a grand and colourful tale set upon dear old 35mm film, he also enjoyed showing them to others.

Through the years, he showed hundreds of reels to thousands and thousands of others. His love of film, and equal love of putting on a good show for those who paid their shillings at the ticket booth, resulted in what could best be described as a cinematic windfall for the American film industry.

For John Redman (Jack) Murtagh created a legacy although he would not have seen it that way. Jack's foresight in collecting and storing films (many of them classics) and his generosity in sharing them with others has been echoed by many members of the New Zealand Film Buffs Association.

If the American film industry, and its archival branches, had never heard of this association down there in little ol' Noo Zeeland then they certainly know about it now. Brian Meacham, who is a preservationist for the Los Angeles archive of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science, heard about the desire of the Film Buffs to save films during a visit to the New Zealand Film Archive in 2009.

He was stunned and delighted to discover a "treasure trove" of real forgotten silver. He re-discovered films that had long disappeared from the American archival landscape. Jack had come across those old films and rather than discard them, he simply put them away as did many projectionists and cinema owners during the 1930s. Bottom line was, because of New Zealand's isolation, it was too costly to send the reels back to the States.

But there was also the grand old Kiwi tradition of saving things. Never throw anything out. Store it away, because "you never know". It's a tradition the American archives are now aware of, and

thankful for. Jack was a keen collector of anything connected to the film industry, not just the film itself, but books and postcards too.

As well as running the projectors in Hawke's Bay theatres, including the State in Hastings, he travelled extensively as a representative for Dominion Screens. He sold everything from glass advertising slides to the theatres themselves. He came across all manner of things, including, importantly to this tale, stocks of nitrate films which he happily added to his ever-growing collection. The fates of these films would otherwise have been sealed with a trip to the dump. Jack had hundreds of films stored in his back shed, and through the years he loaned what nitrates he had to the then National Film Library for copying. In 1993 the remaining nitrate films in Jack's collection were uplifted during the Film Archive's Last Film Search, and have since been copied and stored. But it was the foreign nitrates that got the American industry excited, because they recognised that most of the 75 Kiwi-collected films are unavailable anywhere else in the world. The role of the Kiwi film buffs whose devotion and desire to safeguard the heritage of the film industry cannot be overstated.

What was kept and uncovered in places like Jack Murtagh's back shed was, quite simply, irreplaceable treasure. Those in the land where classic films like John Ford's 1927 work *Upstream* and the 1923 *Maytime* starring Clara Bow were produced had long given up the idea they would ever surface again. But then they hadn't counted on chaps like Jack, the Film Buffs Association, and the Kiwi penchant for collecting everything. Good old Jack Murtagh had both films in his collection, and they formed part of the 19 films, short and feature length, which the American industry has gratefully received from that wonderful collection.

Film collections had emerged from all over the country, from locations as far afield as Invercargill, Rangiora and Masterton, and two nitrate collections were salvaged from auction houses and estate sales. To the American cinema industry they may have been forgotten silver, but not to the Film Buffs and people like Jack Murtagh ... the epitome of film buffery. Jack Murtagh's 19 nitrate gems were: *Birth of a Hat* (1920 industrial short), *Brilliantino the Bullfighter* (1922 Monty Banks two-reel comedy), *A Bashful Bigamist* (1922 Billy Bletcher farce), *The Better Man* (1912 western), *The Diver* (1916 documentary on how to set undersea explosives), *Dodge Motor Cars* (1917 automaking documentary), *An Easter Lily* (1914 drama), *Fordson Tractors* (1918 Ford promotional film), *Idle Wives* (1916 first reel of a Louis Weber feature film), *Maytime* (1923 film starring Clara Bow), *Midnight Madness* (1928 Clive Brook comedy), *The Tares of the Wheat* (1912 family melodrama), *A Trip Through China* (1917 fragment from a documentary about Peking in 1910), *Under the Daisies* (1913 two-reeler featuring an early performance by Norma Talmadge), *Upstream* (1927 backstage romance directed by John Ford), *Why Husbands Flirt* (1918 wry marital comedy), *A Window on Washington Park* (1913 family melodrama), *The Woman Hater* (1910 early Pearl White vehicle), *War in a Closet* (1914 starring and directed by Mabel Normand).