

Noise, Heat and the Smell of Oil

Russell Campbell who in 2020 celebrated 60 years as a projectionist remembered the long hours, late nights and hot sweaty conditions while working in the film industry, but also considered it 'reel' work. He found it so enjoyable, he couldn't imagine doing anything else.

His mother and father met while working at a cinema in Invercargill – he was the relief manager and she was an usherette. They married and after Russell was born, the family moved to Gisborne where his father became the full-time manager of the King's Theatre. Their living quarters were at the back of the theatre and the sliding doors in his bedroom opened out onto a concrete pad, which lead to the back of the projection room. It was around 1950 that he saw his first projection box and where the seeds were sown for what would become a lifetime job.

In 1960, he began his projection apprenticeship at the Embassy Theatre in Dunedin's Princes Street. He would also work at the St James Theatres in both Dunedin and Gore before getting a provisional licence to project films. Leaving Dunedin, he moved around quite a lot working in small country town theatres which allowed him to see much of the country.

While many believed as a projectionist, you would get to see see lots of films, this was not the case as you were always kept busy between reel changes rewinding films along with other duties, which didn't give you any time to watch much at all. He could look at a film today that he had screened often and it would be a whole new experience for him.

He always loved the mechanics of the job and when he gained his A-Grade Certificate, this enabled him to work in the big city cinemas. In 1966, he began working at the Odeon in Christchurch and sadly came to realise that this was to be the end of the heyday – the end of the golden era, when everybody went to the pictures. Television had killed the movie theatre. Previously, going to the theatre was an occasion and people dressed up accordingly. The sessions would begin with a series of short informative films, followed by an intermission before the main feature would be screened. Now days, there is no atmosphere in the cinemas and not a lot differentiates one from another. With digital and hard drives, the job of the true projectionist is becoming a lost art. Many theatres are automated as well which means even less people to run them.

For the past 25 years, Mr Campbell has been the projectionist at Dunedin's Regent Theatre and although semi-retired, he still does projection work when the opportunity presents itself. He said two of the highlights of his career at the Regent had been screening the *Scarflies* movie (because he helped with the production of this film) and Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. He considered himself lucky to have been involved in both.

