

“Mr. Stubbs the Entertainer” and His Travelling Motion Picture Show

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Résumé de l'article

Aux débuts du cinéma, avant que les salles de cinéma ne soient pleinement établies, des exposants itinérants se déplaçaient d'un endroit à l'autre avec leur stock de films, de projecteurs et d'autres équipements, offrant aux gens la possibilité de voir, parfois pour la première fois, le nouveau phénomène technologique de l'époque. Certains de ces exposants, dont les activités commerciales étaient importantes, sont relativement célèbres. Beaucoup moins connu est le « showman » James Stubbs, de Peterborough, en Ontario, qui a voyagé pendant une quinzaine d'années avec ses films régionaux et religieux, contribuant ainsi à la croissance et à l'acceptation de l'exposition cinématographique dans la province.



Figure 1. James Stubbs, 1912, *Peterborough Museum and Archives (PMA)*, Roy Studio (Balsillie Collection of Roy Studio Images), Bio 10570.

“Mr. Stubbs the Entertainer” and His Travelling Motion Picture Show *

by Robert G. Clarke

“Posters are out announcing an entertainment of moving pictures, stereopticon views, etc., to be given in the Masonic Hall on Thursday evening, March 22, under the auspices of the Public Library.” – *The Liberal* (Richmond Hill), 15 March 1906.

“Grand entertainment in St. Patrick’s Hall, in the evening, by Mr. James Stubbs... who will give his celebrated moving picture and stereopticon entertainment, which is the best before the public today.” – “Douro Picnic Next Thursday,” *Peterborough Daily Review*, 11 June 1906.

“The moving picture show in the Town Hall on New Year’s night by Mr. Stubbs, of Peterborough... proved to be both pleasant and profitable.” – “Havelock,” *Peterborough Evening Examiner*, 7 January 1908, 6.

One Monday in late March 1904, an energetic fifty-one-year-old Peterborough man, James Stubbs, was setting out on a remarkable trip. He was heading off by horse and cart

and railways cars to offer *forty-six nights* of “illustrated entertainment” in places large and small, wherever he could find interested audiences.¹

Stubbs was one of a handful of men

* Many thanks, once again, to Paul S. Moore for his help with this article (from an early stage), to the Trent Valley Archives and Peterborough Museum and Archives, and to the constant support and encouragement of John Wadland, professor emeritus of Trent University.

¹ “Forty-Six Nights of Entertainment,” *Examiner* (Peterborough), 28 March 1904, 4.

who were taking up a new calling. A blacksmith and carpenter by trade, he was also a deeply religious man, a temperance crusader, and a lover of the new technological gadgets of his time. Those aspects of his life—combined with an inventive spirit and a gift for putting himself before the public—were a large part of what took him on the road.

In those days, film historian Calvin Pryluck says, “Wherever there was entertainment, there were movies”²—although at the time he was speaking of, around the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, they were not yet called “movies.” Instead, they were called “living,” “animated,” or “photographic” pictures, or “kinematograph” (or cinematograph)—and perhaps most often simply moving or motion pictures—all “thrown” on a screen of some sort, often a canvas.

For the first decade or so of their existence, the short, silent flickers would show up in opera houses or makeshift black tents, on showboats—and even in the Klondike, Pryluck says, “at the height of the gold rush of 1898... thousands of

miles from any other settlement.”³

This motion picture experience depended to a great deal on touring “showmen” (and they were invariably men) who would purchase a quantity of reels, a projector, and maybe a phonograph machine (or gramophone) and go on the road—almost always a railroad—“stopping for a few days in the local opera house or town hall just like any

Abstract

In the early days of cinema, before motion picture theatres were fully established, travelling exhibitors went from place to place with their stock of films, projectors, and other equipment, offering people a chance to see, sometimes for the first time, the new technological phenomenon of the age. A number of these exhibitors are relatively famous—and they had large business operations. A much lesser-known, and independent, travelling “showman” was James Stubbs, of Peterborough, Ontario, who took his regional and religious bandwagon on the road for about fifteen years, contributing as he went to the growth and acceptance of motion picture exhibition in the province.

Résumé: *Aux débuts du cinéma, avant que les salles de cinéma ne soient pleinement établies, des exposants itinérants se déplaçaient d'un endroit à l'autre avec leur stock de films, de projecteurs et d'autres équipements, offrant aux gens la possibilité de voir, parfois pour la première fois, le nouveau phénomène technologique de l'époque. Certains de ces exposants, dont les activités commerciales étaient importantes, sont relativement célèbres. Beaucoup moins connu est le « showman » James Stubbs, de Peterborough, en Ontario, qui a voyagé pendant une quinzaine d'années avec ses films régionaux et religieux, contribuant ainsi à la croissance et à l'acceptation de l'exposition cinématographique dans la province.*

² Calvin Pryluck, “The Itinerant Movie Show and the Development of the Film Industry,” in *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing*, ed. Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2008), 43.

³ Pryluck, “Itinerant Movie Show.”

itinerant show or travelling vaudeville program.”⁴ Church halls were also likely spots for a screening. Circuses travelling from city to city carried motion pictures with them, putting them on display in massive “black tents” or “black tops” that kept out the light both day and night.⁵

These travelling exhibitors were not an entirely new or unknown feature of the cultural landscape. Moving pictures were, after all, in the words of U.S. cinema historian Charles Musser, “acceptable and logical extensions of established practice”—in effect another variation on commercial/cultural traditions already well established in the previous century. Past practice added to the possibilities of

a favourable reception. The motion picture—and its audience—came onto the scene, as film theorist Dudley Andrews puts it, “at the end of an essentially nineteenth-century fascination with engulfing illusions.”⁶

A number of the early motion picture exhibitors became relatively famous: for example, Lyman H. Howe and Archie L. Shepard, both from the United States. Perhaps the best known in Canada was John C. Green, who participated in one of the country’s earliest screenings, in Ottawa in July 1896, and subsequently took moving pictures, music, and magic shows on the road for twenty years.⁷ But there were others too.

⁴ Paul S. Moore, “Early Movie-Going in Niagara: From Itinerant Shows to Local Institutions, 1897–1910,” in *Covering Niagara: Studies in Local Popular Culture*, ed. Joan Nicks and Keith Grant (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), 79.

⁵ Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 12; Pryluck, “Itinerant Movie Show,” 44; ad, “Lindsay’s Twenty-first Annual Central Exhibition,” *Weekly Post* (Lindsay), 11 September 1903, 1.

⁶ Dudley Andrew, “Film and Society: Public Rituals and Private Space,” in *Exhibition: The Film Reader*, ed. Ina Rae Hark (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 161; Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*, vol. 1, *History of the American Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994 [1990]), 185; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 11.

⁷ For Howe, see Charles Musser and Carol Nelson, *High-Class Moving Pictures: Lyman H. Howe and the Forgotten Era of Traveling Exhibition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991). For Shepard, see Paul S. Moore, “The Narrative of Cinema as a Separate Attraction: Archie L. Shepard’s Advance Newspaper Publicity, 1903–1907,” in *New Perspectives on Early Cinema: Concepts, Approaches, Audiences*, ed. Mario Slušan (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming, 2021); Musser and Nelson, *High-Class Moving Pictures*, 142ff; Musser, *Emergence of Cinema*, 366, 374, 425, 444; Robert Grau, *The Theatre of Science: A Volume of Progress and Achievement in the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Broadway Publishing Co., 1914, 28–35, 293, 300 <archives.org>; and Anne Morey, “Exhibition in Wilmington, North Carolina,” in *Hollywood in the Neighborhood*, ed. Fuller-Seeley, 57. For Green, see Peter Morris, *Embattled Shadows: A History of Canadian Cinema, 1895–1939* (Montreal: McGill Queen’s University Press), 2–3, 12–13; and Morris, “Historical Notes, The First Films in Canada: The True Story (1),” *Cinema Canada*, June–July 1976, 18–19. For the turn in film studies towards a “new cinema history” emphasizing film exhibition, circulation, and reception (as opposed to primarily emphasizing the film “text” and production), see, for instance, *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, ed. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Gregory A. Waller, ed., *Movie-going in America* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002); Ina Rae Hark, ed., *Exhibition: The Film Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); and Paul S. Moore, *Now Playing: Early Moviegoing and the Regulation of Fun* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), among others.

In early 1897 two Belleville men started out on an extensive tour of Eastern Ontario villages and towns with new inventions offering both sight and sound: a "Kineoptiscope" [*sic*] and a "Graphophone." A couple of months later Veriscope projections of "The Great Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight" made the rounds. They arrived, for instance, in Peterborough, Ontario, in June, followed in early October by "genuine pictures" of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Procession—"Every feature! Every detail!"⁸

In the late 1890s a Lindsay, Ontario, man, Frederic Conway Edmonds—said to be "one of the first travelling showmen in Canada"—began carrying films from place to place using an Edison Projecting Kinetoscope (also called a Projectoscope) with a supply of five short films.⁹

For a decade and a half the lesser-

Figure 2. Peterborough Daily Examiner, 5 February 1895, np. One of a host of travelling attractions to come through Peterborough in the second half of the nineteenth century, both paving the road for, and paralleling, the advent of motion pictures.

known figure of James Stubbs was among those travelling around the Southern Ontario countryside, connecting the dots on the landscape map with the aid of a dense network of rail lines and readily available horse-drawn carts. From Ottawa to Orillia, Kingston to Kilmount, Stubbs introduced "magic lantern" slides, music, and motion pictures along with hefty doses of his own brand of Protestant religion—and much more—to communities across the lower reaches of Ontario.

Although he was not alone in what he was doing, James Stubbs was a peculiar force within his region. A deeply religious man, he was in effect a proselytizer who spread both the old word of God and the new images of mechanical reproduction. Working within the confines of the white settler society, his combination of Christian

⁸ "The Great Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight," *Examiner*, 3 June 1897, 4; ads, *Examiner*, 8 October 1897, 5; "Tomorrow Night's Attraction," *Examiner*, 30 March 1897, 4; Paul S. Moore, "Mapping the Mass Circulation of Early Cinema: Film Debuts Coast to Coast in Canada in 1896 and 1897," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, 21:1 (Spring 2012), 68–69. A Veriscope was an early motion picture projector combining the features of a magic lantern and Kinetoscope.

⁹ Morris, *Embattled Shadows*, 13, 14, 22; "He's an Old Veteran," *Lindsay Weekly Post*, 9 March 1900, 7 (a short piece about Edmonds's father); "Another Fenian Raid Veteran," *Lindsay Post*, 19 March 1912, 3; "Dashes Here and There," *The Canadian* (Lindsay), 14 August 1896, 1; "Little Local Lines," *Watchman Warder* (Lindsay), 31 October 1901, 8; *Lindsay Weekly Post*, 12 August 1904, 5; *Moving Picture World*, 12 October 1907, 502.

OPERA HOUSE, PETERBOROUGH
SIX DAYS ONLY
JANUARY 21st to 27th
Something entirely new. The Marvel of the age. The wonderful

Cinematographe

The greatest attraction at the last Toronto Fair.

Realistic Motion Pictures

Nothing like them ever seen in Canada before.

EVENINGS at 7.30. MATINEES Saturday and WEDNESDAYS at 3.
Adults 25 cents. Children 10 cents. 6d-2w

Figure 3. Peterborough Daily Review, 13 January 1897, p.5. The first travelling film exhibition to come to town — followed by many others. I suspect James Stubbs was there one of those nights, if he wasn't off travelling.

OPERA HOUSE
ONE NIGHT ONLY
THURSDAY, JUNE 3rd
THE BIG FIGHT. The great fac-simile of the 16 round fight of 1897 reproduced by counter-parts of

CORBETT and FITZSIMMONS

Presented through the medium of the greatest of all motion-picture machines,
THE FERISCOPE.

Also the terrific 6 round fight between CORBETT and COURTNEY. In addition to the pictures of the fights, several other interesting views are shown.

ADMISSION—25c, 35c and 50c.

Figure 4. Examiner, 31 May 1897, np. Among the earliest travelling motion pictures to arrive in Peterborough.

and secular provided a ready audience amongst the largely Anglo and rural settler population of his time.

Stubbs had begun appearing in public in the late 1890s—early 1900s. He was prominent enough that by 1902 a Peterborough newspaper was identifying him as “Mr Stubbs, the entertainer”—a label suggesting that he was already known locally for the charm of his presentations. On that occasion he was an “attractive feature” of a spring opening event at the Gough Brothers’ hat shop on Peterborough’s main street. He appeared, along with Butcher’s Orchestra, to demonstrate his new “phonograph” machine. Proclaimed an advertisement: “Free! Free! Music and Hats!”¹⁰

Some three months later Stubbs took his gramophone to Jubilee Point on Rice Lake, where the *City of Peterborough* was sitting at the wharf. He placed the machine on the ship and (as the paper reported) “entertained the people who assembled on the hillside.”¹¹

A particularly telling moment in the history of reports related to Stubbs came in March 1904. Having newly purchased “\$400 worth of moving pictures of the very latest subjects,” Stubbs was announcing his forty-six nights of screenings booked in advance here and there around the countryside.¹² His program also included 150 “stereopticon views.” Somehow managing to cope with all the necessary equipment, he boarded

¹⁰ *Examiner*, 18 March 1902, 4.

¹¹ “Farmers at Jubilee Point,” *Examiner*, 13 June 1902, 5.

¹² “Forty-Six Nights of Entertainment,” *Examiner*, 28 March 1904, 4.



Figure 5. *Examiner*, 18 March 1902, p.4. An early appearance by "Mr. Stubbs, the entertainer."

the train at Peterborough's CPR station, heading west. He disembarked to show his films at various points along the line, in the end stopping somewhere just short of Toronto; then, after returning to Peterborough, he took the Grand Trunk Railway line south, spending evenings in Port Hope, Cobourg, "and nearly all the towns along the front." Next he went west along the CPR line to visit towns in the Ottawa Valley, including Pembroke, Renfrew, and Ottawa (where he would spend seven successive nights).

Stubbs had started out a decade earlier by offering "lectures" with a religious bent and temperance twist around Peterborough. As early as 1895 he was sighted about sixteen kilometres west of Peterborough in Mount Pleasant, delivering a talk in the hall of the IOGT (International Order of Good Templars), "accompanied by a load of Good Templars

from Peterboro." As a Chief Templar and Provincial Deputy, he went out on the road for the body, promoting the cause and organizing new lodges—making it clear, too, that he was not "going forth" to make money, but rather to "be the means of assisting to build up good character." A devout church-going Protestant and a singer to boot, Stubbs spoke at local Bible classes and delivered Sunday sermons to church congregations. He offered opening prayers for meetings and chaired concerts. In February 1898 he conducted five weeks of evangelistic meetings in the town of Epsom, west of Port Perry, adding about sixty new members to the church there.¹³

As he travelled here and there, he quickly attracted attention around the district for other diversions: "magic lantern" shows—also called "lime-light" shows and "stereopticon views"—with both illustrated songs and recorded music played on his new phonograph machine. One of his standard subjects was "The life of Christ, from the Cradle to the Throne" accompanied by the limelight or stereopticon views. On one such "pleasant and profitable" evening in December 1898, speaking to a church Young People's group, he mixed his content with "views of picturesque and

¹³ "Mount Pleasant," *Millbrook Reporter*, 29 August 1895, 3; "Election of Officers," *Examiner*, 31 January 1896, np; "Personal," *Examiner*, 24 February 1898, np.

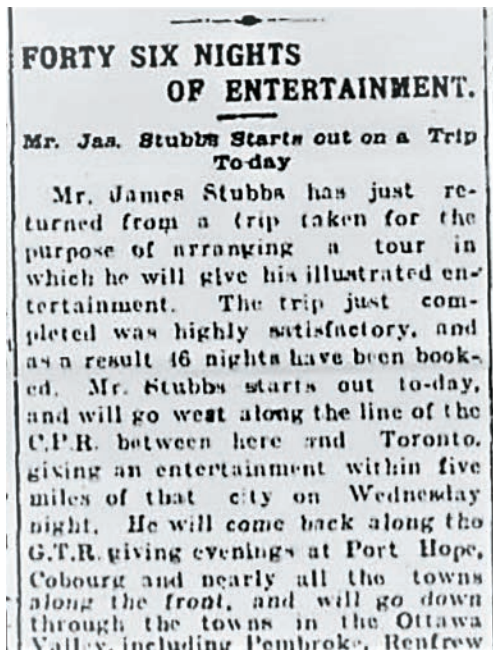


Figure 6. *Examiner*, 28 March 1904, p.4.

noted places in Canada, United States, France and the Old Country.” But, according to the report, his intention was fully serious:

Mr. Stubbs is a well known temperance worker, and, in closing, gave some wholesome and profitable advice to the young men and boys, urging them to live noble, useful lives and to abstain from every form of evil

that would tend to degrade or make them less than God intended them to be.¹⁴

The first reports of his use of the magic lantern or stereopticon appeared in late 1898. Sometime in 1902 Stubbs added a moving picture projector to his arsenal.

The brief news articles thereafter identified him as “Mr. Stubbs, of Peterboro” along with labels such as “noted traveller,” “expert stereopticon operator,” and “the lime-light entertainer”—and even on occasion as “Professor” and “Rev.” Stubbs. One report referred to him as “a prophet in his own country.” On at least one Sunday he filled in for a preacher who was called away to attend a funeral. He specialized in Sunday School anniversaries, church benefits, school-house gatherings, and town-hall meetings; his stops were more often than not fund-raising events, with Stubbs himself receiving a modest stipend from the proceeds. The shows were declared to be “very popular with churches” and often presented under their auspices.¹⁵

Over the years he would have been travelling with a fair bit of equipment—not just a phonograph machine and a stereopticon to display the illustrated songs, but also the Projecting Kinetoscope.¹⁶

¹⁴ “North Monaghan, Y.P.S.C.E. Union,” *Examiner*, 5 December 1898, 1. For another such evening, “Entertainment at the Home,” *Examiner*, 18 April 1899, np, with inmates of the Protestant Home.

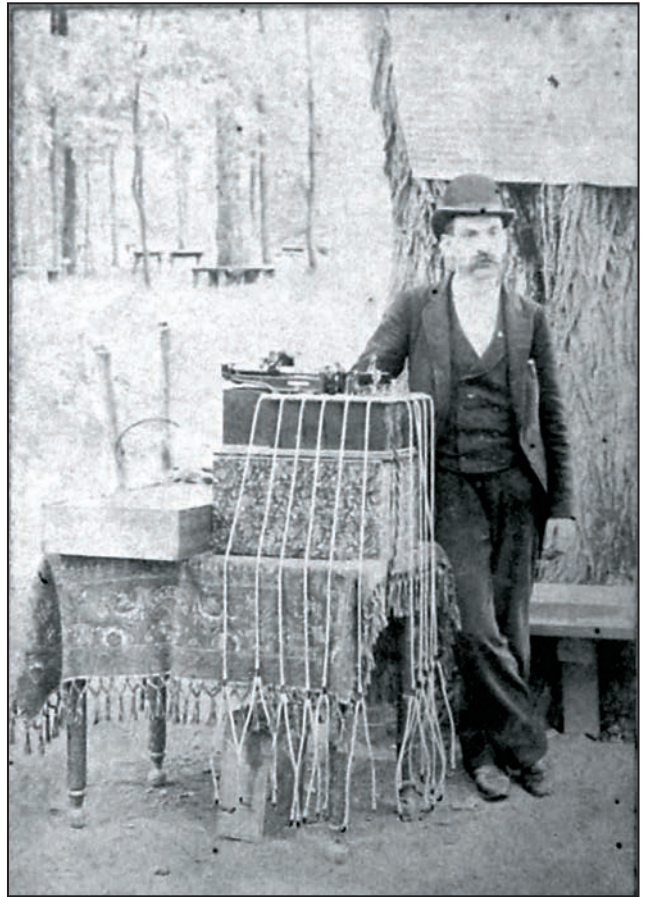
¹⁵ “Park Street Sunday School,” *Peterborough Daily Review*, 9 March 1907, 12; “Lotus,” *Lindsay Post*, 29 December 1911, 1; “Forty-Six Nights of Entertainment,” *Examiner*, 28 March 1904, 4. For an “entertainment” appearance at the Grace Church Sunday School in Peterborough, for instance, Stubbs received a payment of \$6.00 (over \$34.00 in today’s currency). “Auditor’s Report Shows a Balance: Revised Figures of Grace Church Sunday School for 1905,” *Examiner*, 25 May 1906, 2.

¹⁶ The 1901 model Projecting Kinetoscope, said to be “a complete revolution in projecting machines,” carried 1,000 feet of film on a single reel; Musser, *Emergence of Cinema*, 314. Illustrated songs—with a singer performing a popular song, usually accompanied by a pianist while twelve to eighteen glass slides (painted by hand in colour) illustrating the lyrics were projected on the screen—had been around for a

Figure 7. An Edison Class M Phonograph, equipped with multiple listening tubes, was a favourite machine of exhibitors, and Stubbs may well have used it — although when he appeared in large halls he would have substituted a horn for the listening tubes that can be seen hanging down from the machine. From Phonographica, by Fabrizio & Paul. Courtesy of the Antique Phonograph Society. Used With Permission.

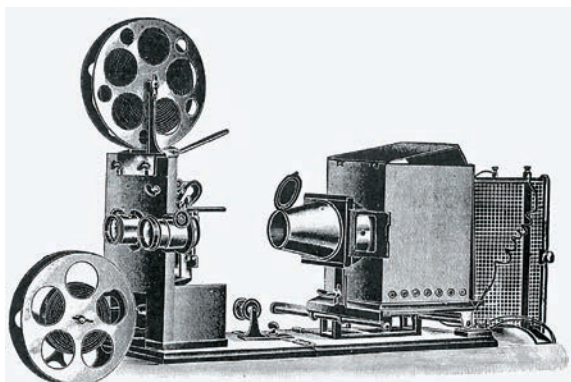
Presumably on his own—though perhaps he hired a “hand” to help out—he was hauling a trunk and a number of boxes on and off of trains and/or horse-drawn carts. He would continue his journeys off and on until 1914. His recorded stops read like an unusually rugged road map of south/central/eastern Ontario, with a few places relatively large—Lindsay, Orillia, Barrie, Ottawa—but most of them a scattering of tiny rural hamlets, usually at a short distance from the rail lines: Baddow, Baltimore, Dongola, Lotus, Fairbairn, North Manvers, Nogies Creek, Irondale, Salem Corners, Gelert, and Newtonville, to name only a few. Often, to make the most of his stops Stubbs would combine two events in the same town: Sunday church-service talks or “preaching” (complete with his illustrations or “views”); and more general presentations in a local hall on a Saturday or Monday evening.

Like Peterborough’s famed photographer Robert Maitland (R.M.) Roy and Lindsay’s Edmonds, Stubbs was said to have a “very fine stereopticon lantern.” He employed it in the middle of winter



1899, for instance, to give an illustrated lecture in the school house in Mount Horeb (about thirty-three kilometres west of Peterborough), where he displayed about ninety-five “of the latest views” on a large canvas. In autumn that year he appeared one Saturday evening at a school house in Pleasant Point (on Sturgeon Lake, north of Lindsay). An account of the visit explained that, in his entertainment, “consisting mainly of lime-light views,” he used “acetylene gas”

decade or so in vaudeville performances.



Giving front view of the Edison Kinetoscope, 1901 model. Rheostat on the right. Light centered on interruption lens which is shown adjusted to its position on the left hand edge of the carrying case.

Figure 8. Edison Projecting Kinetoscope 1901 model (3). Image from "Instructions for Setting up and Operating the Edison Projecting Kinetoscope, 1901 Model," Form No. 107, Orange, N.J. Rutgers University Libraries, rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib.

in the lantern and "the views were made very distinct on the canvas." Although his subjects were said to be "miscellaneous," many of them were "points of interest in the Old Country."¹⁷

The very next day he was at a nearby church providing material more in keeping with a Sunday "gospel song and service": the "Life of Christ" pictures and illustrations of hymns such as "Rock of Ages" and "Jesus Lover of My Soul." The

report commented: "While the pictures on the hymns were displayed the audiences joined heartily in singing. In the opinion of many, the pictures, especially those of Sunday evening, were the best they had ever seen."¹⁸

Towards the end of that year—just before the turn of the century—Stubbs was in Lindsay, where a heavy downpour of rain (in late December!) did not deter crowds from turning out to a lecture accompanying "over one hundred and fifty views... clearly shown on a large canvas." Among other things he presented images of "The South African War," a topic then very much in the news and close to the hearts and minds of his audience, which would have been made up almost entirely, if not wholly, of people of British origin: in this conflict, which had begun just two months earlier (and would last until May 1902), Canadians had gone overseas to fight with the British against the Boers, who were trying to assert their independence from the Empire; while the British won out in the end, the loss of life was huge in a war that occurred, strangely, between two groups of white people in a continent with a largely Black population.

¹⁷ Local papers reported on Stubbs's early stereopticon or limelight presentations: "Mount Horeb," *Watchman-Warder* (Lindsay), 2 February 1899, 2; "Mount Pleasant," *Watchman-Warder*, 9 November 1899, 7; "Pleasant Point," *Canadian Post* (Lindsay), 10 November 1899, 10 ("limelight views" and entertainment in a school house); "Lecture on South African War," *Lindsay Weekly Post*, 22 December 1899, 9. See also Helen Rutherford Willcox, *Bridgenorth: The Centre of the Universe* (Bridgenorth, Ontario: Smith Township Historical Society, 1998), 109. Willcox attributes the early stereopticon showings "at the Town Hall" in Bridgenorth to James's brother, Joseph; but it was clearly James who did the later travelling. "Queen-st. Methodist Church," *Watchman-Warder*, 30 May 1901, 8, cites "a 14-ft. canvas." The 1899 presentation was on Thursday, 26 January.

¹⁸ "Pleasant Point," *Watchman-Warder*, 9 November 1899, 7; "Pleasant Point," *Canadian Post*, 10 November 1899, 10. The *Watchman-Warder* report gives the title of the pictures as "The Life of Christ from Margaret to Throne," but the *Canadian Post* gets it right.

Figure 9. A typical horn around the time Stubbs was travelling. The machine, despite the labelling, is not an Edison but a c.1895 Type K Graphophone. Thanks to George Paul for the photos and info. From *Phonographica*, by Fabrizio & Paul. Courtesy of the Antique Phonograph Society. Used With Permission.

In this event, as usual, the “views” Stubbs presented were promoting a cause:

Mr. Stubbs has a thorough grasp of his subject and his descriptive details were most instructive and gave the audience a great knowledge of the Boers and the country in which the British are now fighting. Rounds of cheers rang out when the portrait of Col. Sam Hughes, in military attire, was thrown on the canvas. The entertainment throughout was thoroughly enjoyed by all, and no doubt the Y.M.C.A. will be in a position to contribute a handsome sum towards maintaining a secretary among our soldiers in the Transvaal.¹⁹

Stubbs’s images of the South Afri-

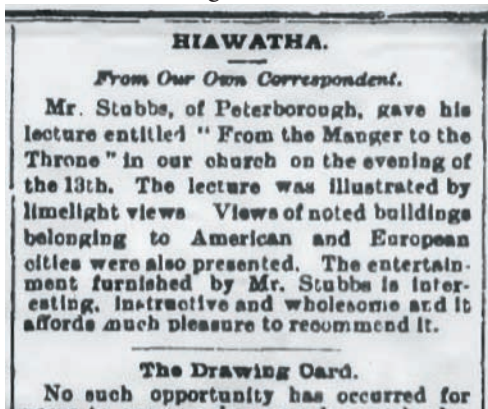


Figure 10. Examiner, 19 December 1898, np. The *Hiawatha* reserve is south of Peterborough on the north shore of Rice Lake.



can War were a standard attraction for a while. In March 1900 he travelled about seventy-eight kilometres northwest of Peterborough to the small village of Victoria Road, a stop north of Kirkfield on the Midland Railway. There, along with his limelight views of the South African war he also screened images of the popular *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*, a play with a more local message. “Mr. Stubbs is a temperance advocate,” a report commented. “The horrible scenes depicted upon the canvas were only glimpses of what is going on daily and hourly, not a hundred miles from our own homes.”²⁰

Throughout this time he was making a name for himself. After hearing Stubbs

¹⁹ “Lecture on the South African War,” *Lindsay Weekly Post*, 22 December 1899, 9.

²⁰ “Victoria Road,” *Lindsay Weekly Post*, 23 March 1900, 10. The play was put on film in 1897 and was remade many times after that; the news account said only that it was “views,” so what Stubbs was presenting on this occasion would have been a limelight presentation, and not the 1897 film. In February 1900 he had also delivered a lecture on the Transvaal, accompanied “with scenes of the war.” “Newtonville,” *Canadian Statesman* (Bowmanville), 14 February 1900, np.



Figure 11. A portion of the Grand Trunk Railway System, Map of the Ontario Highlands, c1901, wikipedia.org.

lecture in his church one evening in February 1899, the Presbyterian minister at Apsley and Clydesdale, north of Peterborough, took the trouble of writing to the *Examiner*:

I believe good cannot fail to result from such an entertainment. The magic lantern illustrations accompanied by Mr. Stubb's [*sic*] verbal description of Scripture scenes and incidents make a wonderfully realistic reproduction of the life of Christ, eminently calculated to touch the heart. The miscellaneous pictures of important places and buildings, etc., in various parts of the globe, are sure to be entertaining and instructive to both old and young. Personally I enjoyed the lecture throughout and most unhesitatingly commend it to the public.²¹

By September 1902 he was screening motion pictures. Along with his stereopticon and phonograph records, he took

the screen with something like a newsreel of current events: views of the recent coronation of Edward VII and his wife Alexandra, the destruction of Mount Pelée (Martinique, 1902), the Battle of Mafeking (a South African War event), and an international yacht race.²² A month later he journeyed as far west as Barrie (about 159 kilometres from Peterborough). At a Sunday evening service of the Elizabeth Street Methodist Church, he used "lime-light views" to illustrate "The Story of Joseph"—but also presented "a number of scenes from the Passion Play through the medium of a Kinetoscope." He returned to the church on Monday evening to provide further entertainment: "the tone of which was morally high and most valuable from an educative point of view."²³

His efforts, according to accounts,

²¹ "An Appreciative Communication," letter to editor from R. McKnight, *Examiner*, 9 March 1899, np.

²² "Y.M.C.A. Winter Work," *Examiner*, 16 September 1902, 8; "For the Boys' Rooms," *Examiner*, 30 September 1902, 5; "To-Night's Entertainment," *Examiner*, 3 October 1902, 4; "In Y.M.C.A. Assembly Hall," *Examiner*, 4 October 1902, 4. These are the first reports I've found that clearly indicate he was showing motion pictures; the 4 October item mentions a "new moving picture machine."

²³ *Northern Advance* (Barrie), 13 November 1902, 1. The news report identifies Stubbs as "W.J." While his son might have been doing some work for him, those initials are more likely to have been in error.

were eminently successful. When he appeared at the Queen Street Methodist Church in Lindsay one Sunday in December 1902, he drew large audiences morning and afternoon, overcrowding the church; at the evening service, “scores were unable to get in.” Once again he returned on Monday evening to present another “interesting” program.²⁴

On the lengthy March 1904 trip, to legitimize his efforts, he had references from

the Reverend John E. Hopkins of Norwood and prominent farmer J.H. Jopling of Bridgenorth, Stubbs’s original home town, about six miles north of Peterborough. But the highest recommendation was that “a great many return dates are being arranged” as a result of his travels. For many audience members in the outlying villages, Stubbs was probably delivering their first chance to see moving pictures.

James Stubbs was born in Canada West on 10 April 1853, the last of six children in the family of William and Hannah Stubbs. William and Hannah had



Figure 12. James Stubbs (on the left) and his family: wife Sarah, son William, and William’s wife, Lillian, c.1912. Photo from the Whiten Studio. Trent Valley Archives, F94.

married in England around 1835 and subsequently immigrated to Canada West, settling in the Bridgenorth area. Of their six children, the first two were born in England and the last four in their new home. But father William “perished” in a storm in 1860, at age forty-five; Hannah was in poor health, suffering for at least a decade from a condition identified as “shaking palsy.” As a result, by 1861 the four younger children were left in the care of a prominent Bridgenorth farmer, James Mann; mother Hannah was living separately (she died in Peterborough at age seventy-seven in 1887).²⁵

²⁴ *Watchman-Warder*, 4 December 1902, 13; “Church Notes,” *Lindsay Weekly Post*, 5 December 1902, 11.

²⁵ Canada Census, 1861, Library and Archives Canada (LAC); “perished” in 1861 census; County of Peterborough, Schedule C.—Deaths, 013567, Hannah Stubbs entry; “Died,” *Peterborough Examiner*, 28 June 1877, np.

As they came of age James and his older brother Joseph took up farming in the Bridgenorth area, but by the age of seventeen James was apprenticing as a blacksmith with William Yelland in Peterborough, boarding with the family. Those were probably highly formative years. Yelland had a thriving George Street business as a carriage and wagon-maker; his shop included blacksmithing and horse-shoeing, among other things. He was also prominent politically, as a city councillor for thirteen years (first elected in 1877) and mayor (1896–98).²⁶ Somewhere along the line James met up with Sarah J. Donell, who had been born on Bethune St. in Peterborough in 1853. Sarah had spent her recent years working as a school teacher in Buckhorn, about thirty kilometres north of Peterborough. They were married in Peterborough on Christmas Day 1873. A son, William J., was born in 1875; a daughter, Victoria Maud, was born in 1883 but died of bronchial pneumonia just before her third birthday.²⁷

At some point James also managed to purchase, perhaps with Joseph, the well-established Bridgenorth blacksmith shop of Neil MacDonald (a popular fellow known around town as the “gentle giant”). But by 1883 that business had been sold and James moved his family to Peterborough, where he worked as a

blacksmith and branched into carpentry as well. Indeed, in the early 1890s the couple spent a brief spell in Brampton, where James advertised himself as a “house carpenter.” By 1893 James was back working in Peterborough (as a carpenter and machine hand) with the William Donnel planing mill, and the family eventually settled into a house at 231 Dublin. In 1901 the Stubbs shared the house on Dublin St. with their son William and five lodgers ranging in age from fifteen to twenty-eight.²⁸

James, obviously a practical man of many talents, once put his ingenuity and skills as a carpenter together to “invent” a “handy milk receiver”—a convenience aimed at housewives: “a neat box” to be placed outside a home, with plenty of room for containers of milk (either being returned or delivered) and a spot for a milk ticket indicating the quantity desired for that day’s order.²⁹ There were no further reports of this invention (and he was surely not alone in coming up with this idea), but such a box ended up being a staple of households for fifty or sixty years after that.

In the 1890s in Peterborough, given his prominence at various Bible and Temperance meetings, Stubbs developed a lively ease of presentation that would hold him in good stead in the coming decades. Although he was still identifying

²⁶ Canada Census, 1871, LAC; see ad, 1876 *Times Peterborough Business Directory*, 143; G. Wilson Craw, *The Peterborough Story: Our Mayors 1850-1951* (Peterborough, np, 1967), 55–59.

²⁷ The family gravestone has another child listed, “Burtie,” born 2 April 1877, with no date of death; perhaps died in childbirth.

²⁸ Canada Census, 1891, LAC; Canada Census, 1901, LAC; Willcox, *Bridgenorth*, 109.

²⁹ “Stubbs’ Handy Milk Receiver,” *Examiner*, 6 July 1897, np.

himself as a “carpenter” at the turn of the century,³⁰ he had also been taking up a new persona, having apparently discovered how to combine his religious practice with the era’s new technological wonders—and realizing the pleasures (and perhaps minimal reward) of amusing folk at the same time. By 1901 he seemed to be leading something of a double life: declaring his occupation in one case (the 1901 Peterborough business directory) as a carpenter; and in the 1901 census as a “Lecturer.” Stubbs clearly liked to travel: he was on the road (or railroad) constantly from early on. In the autumn of 1901 alone, he was said to have “painted the Midland District red with his illustrated entertainments”—making an astounding seventy stops in the area.³¹

Some ten years later, in 1911, James and Sarah were living in a house that James had built on Water Street. Their now married son William and his wife, and a grandchild, Edgar, age two and a half, also lived there. For years they were



Figure 13. *Examiner*, 13 November 1905, p.7. He also “put on the canvas a number of miscellaneous views of Canadian subjects.”

staunch members of George Street Methodist Church and had a rich social life centred around church activities and friends. With James on the road so much, Sarah must have managed the home front, but she also found time to lead the church’s “young ladies’ class” and teach Sunday school or Bible classes. By the 1910s James was officially giving his occupation as “carpenter,” but he had not completely given up on the entertainment field—in the Peterborough business directories he continued to be cited

as a lecturer. Perhaps, like many highly skilled cultural workers of our own time, James found that to make ends meet he had to have a day job.³²

In 1904 the blacksmith/carpenter-turned-lecturer assured the *Examiner* that he was having no difficulty at all in finding audiences eager for his presentations. He told a reporter about an “instance of particularly quick booking.” One day after arriving in Pembroke, he

³⁰ Peterborough City Directories, 1893, 94; 1895-97, 124; 1897, 156; 1899, 181; 1901, 192; Canada Census, 1901.

³¹ *Examiner*, 28 December 1901, 4.

³² Canada Census, 1901; Canada Census, 1911, LAC; thanks also to Carol Mason’s Family History website <<http://www.tmason1.com/c/pafg276.htm#7343>>. The 1901 census gives James’s year of birth as 1853; the 1911 census gives 1854. Son William J., born in 1876, died 9 April 1916. Family members are buried in Little Lake Cemetery, Peterborough. See also “Death of W.J. Stubbs on Sunday Morning Widely Regretted,” *Examiner*, 10 April 1916, 1.

managed both to have his dinner and to arrange for a film-showing date—and within ten minutes of his arrival was hopping on the train to head home.³³ The anecdote, however accurate, at the very least illustrates his boundless energy and appetite, not just for nourishment but for finding an audience.

Later that same year, on a Tuesday evening in November, Stubbs screened his films in Peterborough's YMCA hall. Under the auspices of the Y's Boys' Department, he presented two "solid hours" of entertainment to a packed audience that included young and old. Using his projector and stretching a canvas across one end of the hall, he took the crowd "on a trip through England, Ireland and Wales," and treated them to scenes of the South African war, a recent trip made by the Duke and Duchess of York, the King and Queen of England attending their first Parliament, a "fire scene," and, perhaps best of all, "Mike's adventure with the steam roller." Stubbs also showed a number of "miscellaneous views of Canadian subjects" and played a selection of music on his phonograph.

He no doubt had the gift of the gab: the lecture he delivered throughout the program was said to be "racy and given in an original style, punctuated every now and then with first-class anecdotes." The evening ended with an "illustrated

recital" of "Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight."³⁴ The subject-matter and his religious and secular mix, delivered in that skilled, charming way, essentially provided a comfortable buttress for the burgeoning Anglo-white-settler community. His multi-media presentations focused not just on the teachings (and Passion) of Christ but also on items dear to the hearts and minds of his audience—familiar fare such as the South African War (with its subtext of colonization), the Crown, and the "Old Country"—and, in the steam roller film, had its comedy relief.

The audience loved him, apparently. When he returned to the Peterborough Y a year later—at least the fourth time he'd presented his program there—the hall was "crowded to the doors, standing room was at a premium, and many were turned away, unable to secure seats."

For two solid hours he held the delighted attention of his audience, which is quite a feat in consideration of the large number of young boys and girls who were present. The views were shown by means of a powerful lime light and were very clear and distinct. The moving pictures were very popular and included a number of new films not shown here before, including the Fall of Port Arthur, Hockey Match, the Waves of the Ocean and others. The stereopticon views covered a wide range, humorous and descriptive. The trip through the British Isles was a central feature of the programme.

³³ "Forty-Six Nights of Entertainment," *Examiner*, 28 March 1904, 4.

³⁴ "Good Entertainment Y.M.C.A. Hall, *Examiner*, 9 November 1904, 4; see also ad for the event, *Examiner*, 8 November 1904, 4. "Mike's adventure with the steam roller" could have been the film *Michael Casey and the Steam Roller* (1902), distributed by Edison Manufacturing and Lubin. I suspect the writer used the word "racy" in its meaning of "liveliness" or "piquancy" rather than the meaning more common nowadays of "risqué" or "suggestive."

In between the various visuals Stubbs once again “sandwiched” phonograph selections: “reproducing the work of some of the leading musicians of the world.”³⁵

Stubbs had a knack for this kind of work. “Arguably,” one film historian points out about this early period, “the exhibitor’s personality was at least as important as his wares in shaping the reception of a film.”³⁶

In March 1905 Stubbs was reported to be south of Peterborough, down near the lakeshore in Brighton, offering his shows at Grace church, among other venues. There, despite bad weather—“many people ploughed through the snow and dug their way through the banks, that they might enjoy the rare treat”—the illustrated entertainment he provided was said to be “the best of the kind ever given in this part of the country.” As one account put it, he had a “thorough mastery of his work.” Even better: “The aim of Mr. Stubbs does not seem to be to make money altogether, but to do good, as well. His entertainment is intensely interesting and very instructive. It is pure, impressive and elevating.”³⁷

A February 1906 report told of how

the irrepressible Stubbs had just returned from a long trip on which he had presented fifty-five “stereopticon entertainments.” He had travelled extensively to Eastern Ontario. At his last stop, in Kingston, he presented a version of “The Life of St. Paul,” including a lecture on the topic. His moving pictures included “showing the shepherd watching their flock by night, the Messiah’s entry into Jerusalem,” and other similar fare. As usual, he offered “many selections on a powerful phonograph.”³⁸ In the following weeks he toured Central Ontario, including Richmond Hill, Newmarket, Thornhill, and Barrie. From town to town he went, dragging his equipment and delivering his rapid-fire mix of stereopticon views, moving pictures, music, and much more to delighted audiences, including children.

Stubbs may have purchased his supply of films second-hand from earlier, larger-scale showmen or from an early film exchange in the United States that initially traded stocks of older, used films.³⁹ He would show the same films over and over again. In any case he was making a little money, both for himself and various caus-

³⁵ “Moving Picture Entertainment,” *Peterborough Weekly Review*, 17 November 1905, 14. Unfortunately, I’ve found no record of what his musical selections were.

³⁶ Morey, “Exhibition in Wilmington, North Carolina,” 57. The phenomenon of “showmanship” would prove to be a key to the development of motion picture exhibition; see, for instance, Ross Melnick, *American Showmanship: Samuel ‘Roxy’ Rothafel and the Birth of the Entertainment Industry, 1908–35* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

³⁷ *Examiner*, 3 March 1905, 4, quoting the *Brighton Star*. “Thorough mastery of his work” is from “North Manvers,” *Lindsay Weekly Post*, 4 May 1900, 1.

³⁸ “Mr. Jas. Stubbs Has Returned from Long Trip,” *Examiner*, 6 February 1906, 2.

³⁹ Paul S. Moore, “‘Bought, Sold, Exchanged and Rented’: The Early Film Exchange and the Market in Secondhand Films in New York Clipper Classified Ads,” *Film History* 31:2 (2019), 1–31 <<https://ps-moore.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2019-Moore-FilmHistory-SecondHand.pdf>>.

es. On more than one occasion reports indicated that people had to be turned away from the church or hall. A typical church service involved the taking up of a "silver collection," and perhaps Stubbs would get a small share. On one occasion proceeds simply went to church maintenance. On another, when the church was said to be packed to its utmost capacity—and "250 free tickets were given to those attending Sunday School"—the net proceeds were reported to be over \$26. An evening in Richmond Hill in March 1906 brought net receipts (through tickets and a special sale of magazines) of \$43.30; Stubbs's share was \$18.00, a substantial sum for the time.⁴⁰

The Richmond Hill entertainment in March 1906 was probably typical of the presentations through this time. Show bills were placed around town to announce the event, which was held in the Masonic Hall on 22 March under the auspices of the Public Library. Admission was 25 cents for adults and 15 cents for children. Stubbs presented his phonograph selections and pictures of his "trips to England, covering over 5,000 miles, with 150 views, illustrated recitations," and more.

He screened a long list of short silent films that were ubiquitous in North America at the time but not so likely to have been seen in Richmond Hill and

surrounding areas: everything from "A London Street Scene," "Moving Parade of Automobiles," and "Battle of Mafeking," to the "State Opening of Parliament," "A Trip from New York to Brooklyn Across the Bridge," "Hockey Match at Montreal," "A New York Fire Scene," and "Irish Mike and the Steam Roller."⁴¹

The hall was filled that evening, and his effort received the usual laudatory response:

The entertainer gave a programme lasting nearly two hours, but as the lecture was varied with stereopticon views, moving pictures, illustrated talks, recitations, anecdotes, and phonograph selections, the interested audience did not perceive the hours gliding by.... Probably the most novel part of the entertainment was the moving pictures, especially to those who had not seen anything of the kind before. The fire scene where people were being taken out of a burning building, British troops bathing in the sea, a visit from Santa Claus... were very realistic.... A number of humorous pictures were also exhibited, and the lecturer proved conclusively that "it is hard to kill an Irishman."⁴²

This last comment related, no doubt, to what was announced as "Irish Mike and the Steam Roller"—which was either *Michael Casey and the Steam Roller* (Edison, 1902) or a pirated version of it, the same film that Stubbs had screened at Peterborough's YWCA in November 1904.

A week or so later Stubbs was at the

⁴⁰ *Watchman-Warder*, 30 May 1901, 8 (recording Stubbs preaching both Sunday morning and evening at the Queen St. Methodist Church); "Fairbairn," *Watchman-Warder*, 16 May 1901, 6 (for church maintenance); "Splendid Entertainment," *Newmarket Era*, 30 March 1906, 3; "Public Library Board," *The Liberal*, 23 August 1906, 4 (breakdown of entertainment on March 22).

⁴¹ "Moving Pictures," *The Liberal*, 15 March 1906, 5.

⁴² "P.L. Entertainment," *The Liberal*, 29 March 1906, 1.

Figure 14. The Liberal (Richmond Hill), 15 March 1906, p.5. A long list of Stubbs films.

Methodist Church in nearby Newmarket with much the same program. That evening people again had to be turned away and the doors locked to prevent further entry. His "splendid" projector threw pictures "on the canvas with the greatest brilliancy." He explained the visuals "in such a manner that they could not fail to interest everyone." As one commentator said, his "heart is in his work." His motion pictures and phonograph selections had a special appeal for children.

Mr. Stubbs carried out the entire program without delay and over two hours passed in an incredibly short time. It was a decided improvement on the usual 'bun feed' and the children deserve great credit for their excellent behaviour—an example that should make one or two grown-up boys at the rear of the church feel ashamed of themselves.⁴³

Stubbs kept on the move: in 1907 he did a circuit from January to March taking in the likes of Richmond Hill (once again), Maple, and Lindsay. He even made a stop in Toronto, at the Clinton Street Methodist Church, around the beginning of March, reportedly delighting a huge audience of seven hundred people.⁴⁴ They truly must have appreciated him and his pictures in Richmond Hill; he returned there in April 1908. In autumn that year he toured the counties of Victoria and Haliburton, showing his "limelight views" for twenty-eight nights

MOVING PICTURES

Posters are out announcing an entertainment of moving pictures, stereopticon views, etc., to be given in the Masonic Hall on Thursday evening, March 22, under the auspices of the Public Library. The programme will consist of selections on the phonograph, illustrated trips to England, covering over 5,000 miles, with 150 views, illustrated recitations, etc., etc. The following are some of the moving pictures to be presented:—A London Street Scene, Moving Parade of Automobiles, Battle of Mafeking; State Opening of Parliament, King and Queen plainly seen in royal carriage; the Black Diamond Express, Yacht Race, A Trip from New York to Brooklyn Across the Bridge, and will show over 200 feet of Coronation Moving Pictures of King and Queen leaving Westminster passing through principal streets of London, Irish Mike and the Steam Roller, British Troops Bathing, Santa Claus, the Village Blacksmith Pulling a Tooth, Hockey Match at Montreal on the Ice, Storm on the Ocean, Defence of Port Arthur; A New York Fire Scene, taking people out of burning building. Admission, 25 and 15 cents.

in succession. In Bobcaygeon he drew a "very large audience" even though the locals there had been given "only a short notice" of his appearance. In Minden the local paper cited him for putting on a "really high-class entertainment" in the town hall. His "moving pictures, stereopticon views, and lecture are all strictly first-class, with nothing to cause a blush to come to the most sensitive person's cheeks, and with everything to commend

⁴³ "Splendid Entertainment," *Newmarket Era*, 30 March 1906, 3.

⁴⁴ "Personal," *Peterborough Daily Review*, 11 March 1907, 5.

it to the masses.”⁴⁵

A week after returning to his home base in Peterborough he was heading west to Woodville, Orillia, and other towns of the Midland district. On these travels he became “more convinced than ever that it pays to give high moral moving pictures to the public.”⁴⁶

James Stubbs continued travelling in Central Ontario through 1910–14. He returned, for instance, to the town of Haliburton in the winter of 1910. The news item contained a rare (and minor) criticism. He had described his “views” of England (most of which, it was said, he had taken himself on a recent trip with his wife), and the reporter pointed out, “He must have made a mistake when he stated it cost him 16 shillings (nearly \$4) for a bed and breakfast.” (It would not have been anywhere near that much; renting a room for a week cost 3 to 5 shillings.) That said, Stubbs himself was not completely romantic about his travel overseas. From time to time, apparently, he would make a crack about what he called “the Old World”—“These people are fifty years behind the times.”⁴⁷

By 1913–14 it appears that, while still occasionally on the road, Stubbs had

dropped motion pictures from his repertoire. By that time moving pictures may have become too readily available in local theatres; and they had grown in sophistication, and sometimes in length. A fixed exhibition chain had moved into place: from production studios (more and more in Hollywood) to centralized “exchanges” or distributors to theatres in cities large and small. Stubbs may not have wanted to spend money on purchasing new films and equipment; age and health issues may have made the constant travelling less attractive. Peter Morris points out (in an article about exhibitor John C. Green) that in Canada early itinerant movie-showmen often settled down to run permanent movie theatres.⁴⁸ For whatever reason, Stubbs did not move in that direction—although he did continue, perhaps on fewer occasions, to cast his limelight views and offer his lectures. As of 22 December 1914 he was reportedly still spreading his charm with “very interesting lime-light views” at a “Christmas Tree and entertainment” in Kirkfield.⁴⁹

A little over two years later, on 4 January 1917, at age sixty-three, James Stubbs died in his residence at 661 Water Street after “a long and painful illness.” In addi-

⁴⁵ “The City and Vicinity—‘Mr. Stubbs at Minden,’” *Examiner*, 1 October 1907, 5 (reprint from *Minden Echo*).

⁴⁶ “Moving Pictures Touring the District,” *Watchman-Warder*, 10 October 1907, 8.

⁴⁷ “Haliburton Pastor Preached His Farewell,” *Watchman-Warder*, 10 February 1910, 1; “Mrs. Sarah J. Stubbs,” in a section, “Peterborough People Here at Confederation,” *Examiner*, 29 June 1927; reprinted in *Heritage Gazette of the Trent Valley*, 22:2 (August 2017), 18–19.

⁴⁸ Peter Morris, “Historical Notes: The First Films in Canada, the True Story,” *Cinema Canada*, June/July 1976, 19.

⁴⁹ “Kirkfield,” *Watchman-Warder*, 7 January 1915, 9. The last account that I have found for a Stubbs presentation is “Lecture at the Temple,” *Examiner*, 18 January 1915, an illustrated lecture on the war and other subjects delivered to the Young People’s Corps of the Salvation Army.

Figure 15. Little Lake Cemetery, Peterborough, 2019.

tion to noting his active participation in church affairs at George Street Methodist, an obituary stated that he was “well known in all parts of the province, having always been interested in religious education and his lectures, with stereopticon views of the Holy Land and scriptural subjects[,] have been given in many of the leading cities and towns.”⁵⁰

Sarah Stubbs lived on until 1931. Husband and wife were buried, along with their son William and daughter-in-law Lillie, in a prominent spot in the middle of Little Lake Cemetery.

In a 1939 retrospective in the *Examiner* on the occasion of the opening of a new movie theatre, an unnamed reporter recalled: “Heralds of the moving picture era [in Peterborough] were two well known citizens, the late R.M. Roy and James Stubbs, each of which had a very fine stereopticon lantern and used to show still pictures in churches and halls all over the district.”⁵¹ In this, significantly, Stubbs was being mentioned in the same local breath as R.M. Roy—a man so well known and respected not just for his huge body of photographic work and documentation of the city’s life, but also for its quality. Although here memory (or the pressures of deadlines?) failed to get the details completely right—Stubbs did far more than



show “still pictures”—at least Peterborough’s touring showman of Central Ontario was not completely forgotten.

As Charles Musser and Carol Nelson remark in their study of Lyman H. Howe and other early travelling exhibitors—in that elusive time before “entertainment had become a complete technological product that could be cheaply shipped”—people such as James Stubbs

⁵⁰ Obituary, *Examiner*, 5 January 1917, 12. The obituary seems to give his address as 687 Water (though the number is difficult to make out), but the home was at 661 Water.

⁵¹ “Floor Coverd [sic] with Sawdust Seats Were Planks, in City’s First Play House” *Examiner*, 28 February 1939, 10.

were crucial elements of the “cultural landscape.”⁵² These showmen introduced their phonograph recordings, limelight views, and motion pictures of countless people in far-flung places in a largely rural environment—to people who had either not previously witnessed the phenomenon or had few chances of doing so.

In this field Stubbs was one of many who gathered small audiences in villages close to their own hometown regions. In the early years of cinema, Stubbs and his kind were different from the better-known travelling exhibitors such as Howe and Shepard, who were major businesses with dozens of employees operating multiple branches across nearly the entire continent.⁵³ But Stubbs was also distinct from other itinerant motion picture exhibitors based in a single region—people such as Cook & Harris, W. Frank Brinton, and even John C. Green or the Veriscope men who went around screening “The Great Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight.” These were still “showmen” who hired small-time vaudeville performers to support their events and primarily booked commercial theatres and local opera houses. They placed

notices of their travels in the *New York Clipper* and other U.S. theatrical publications, and on occasion toured outside their home regions. They later settled down and opened motion picture theatres. Stubbs, for his part, was a strictly regional figure, seemingly with little connection to the wider spheres of cinema exhibition, travelling more or less on his own and appearing mostly in church and community halls. Unlike the upstart entrepreneurs who opened nickel shows in the years after 1907, he did not represent a threat to established commercial interests in Peterborough or Lindsay.⁵⁴

Most significantly, perhaps, Stubbs also bridged the well-established, acceptable, and conventional religious subject-matter—such as the highly popular *Passion Play* (both live performance and moving picture)—with the newly born commercial and secular use of the medium (or at least its “wholesome” side, carefully delivered with nothing to offend). The motion pictures he screened provided a rough balance between religious, educational (including “news” stories and travelogues), and popular subject-matter (“Mike and the Steam Roller”). Bolstered

⁵² Musser and Nelson, *High-Class Moving Pictures*, 276. See also Peter Lester, “Cultural Continuity and Technological Indeterminacy: Itinerant 16mm Film Exhibition in Canada, 1918-1949” (Ph.D. thesis, Department of Communication Studies, Concordia University, 2008), 4.

⁵³ I owe this wider perspective to Paul S. Moore, email to the author, 12 January 2021. For other travelling exhibitors of the time, see Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, “The Archeology of Itinerant Film Exhibition: Unpacking the Brinton Entertainment Company Collection,” in *Routledge Companion to New Cinema History*, ed. Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers (New York: Routledge, 2019), 112–22; Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, “Modernity for Small Town Tastes: Movies at the 1907 Cooperstown, New York, Centennial,” in *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, ed. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers (New York: Blackwell, 2011), 280–94.

⁵⁴ See, for instance, Robert G. Clarke, “In Search of George Scott: Jack of All Trades, Motion Picture Pioneer, World Explorer,” *Ontario History*, 12:1 (Spring 2020), 1–25.

by ingenuity, he was in effect a salesman for a newly established colonial/settler worldview, from temperance concerns to Protestant morality and a sense of loyalty to the “old country.” Then too, his journey from popular lecturer to entertainer (and eventually back again to lecturer) clearly relied on his “good character,” bright personality, and sense of self-promotion as much as on his product.

Although travelling showmen were less dominant after the advent of theatres, itinerant exhibition never did completely die away. People continued to travel around and show films to audiences wherever they could. Indeed, one film theorist argues that itinerant exhibition had its “heyday” in traditional tent show

circuits during the 1930s and 1940s.⁵⁵ Canada’s National Film Board had an important and thriving travelling film circuit in the 1940s, once again bringing motion pictures to communities that would otherwise not have been able to see them.⁵⁶ In general, non-theatrical film screenings would have a long and lasting life.

Nevertheless, in those earlier years, “when the success of the medium of cinema was by no means guaranteed,”⁵⁷ travelling exhibitors like James Stubbs—this “herald of the moving picture era” and “prophet in his own country”—helped to ensure a firm audience for what would become a major twentieth-century art form.

⁵⁵ M. Swartz, “Motion Pictures on the Move,” *Journal of American Culture* 9:3 (1986), 1–7, cited in *Exhibition*, ed. Hark, 1.

⁵⁶ See, for instance, Lester, “Cultural Continuity and Technological Indeterminacy”; Zoë Druick, *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007); Joyce Nelson, *The Colonized Eye: Rethinking the Grierson Legend* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1988).

⁵⁷ Lester, “Cultural Continuity and Technological Indeterminacy,” 4.