

DECEMBER 7, 1984

INTERVIEW WITH GARRY SHIELDS

BY CHERYL GORN

CHERYL: How did you first become interested and get involved in the picture business?

SHIELDS: In the picture business. Well, I was down in California and in the hotel I lived in were some people who were working in the picture business and I used to go out on location with them. And in those days, stunts were different than they are today, and one of the stuntmen was having trouble doing a stunt, driving an automobile and jumping it over a ditch. And I was 18 years old then and I made a wisecrack. I'd hate to think I couldn't do something like that. The director says, "Well, let's see you do it," and I did it (laughing). So that started it. So then I did these little parts down there. Then I came up here and a picture company was started and I can't tell you the name of it now -- oh, Sunbeam, yeah, Sunbeam Film was making a picture here, so I went down and talked to them. They found that I had experience, so, uh, I worked for them as a second camera and also I played some parts, and juveniles and then I just progressed and as other pictures were made here, I was available, and then I started collecting materials so that I had a list of, oh, like kind of like what the State people have now, everything that was available for picture use. So when a company would come up, why, I'd be one of the first ones they would call and, uh, because I knew where locations were and I knew where I could get props and I had a list of people who were actors who could do various parts.

CHERYL: So, excuse me, you worked by yourself. This was your own business?

SHIELDS: I was a freelancer, I guess you'd call it. We didn't consider it a business. And then following through . . . a fellow by the name of Featherstone came up on one picture Student Testimonials to do the labwork, and he and I became very good friends, and when the picture business started dying, he and I became partners, and uh, we shot stills and commercial film and in fact, we made what was considered -- I think it was 1928, 1928 or 1929 -- the best commercial film that was ever made. Prized by the American Advertising Association of America, and that was for the Wheeler-Osgood Company in Tacoma that manufactured Lymonex doors. And then, I worked another big picture after that which was in Utah. When I came back from that I realized that pictures were going out. In fact, Ben Lyon was our leading man in that picture and he had made "Hell's Angels" with Howard Hughes, and then a silent. Then Howard Hughes, the minute he got through with our picture, remade "Hell's Angels" in sound. So that was really the start of sound. I saw the handwriting on the wall. If you didn't have sound, you were out of luck. I came back here and worked about a year

SHIELDS: and a half and built a sound-on-film recording equipment and
(cont) Featherstone and I then went in partnership and we made commercial
sound pictures, and then we made a local newsreel called the Oregon
Sound News for about two years till the depression. Got so rough that
people couldn't pay their bills, so we closed it out and I went into
electrical manufacturing.

CHERYL: And what year was that, that you . . .

SHIELDS: 1931, '32 that we made the newsreel, so that would make it '29 and '30
that I built the equipment. In other words, my experience in the
motion picture business was in the silent days and then as it switched
over into sound and then . . . on sound production on a feature pic-
ture, I never worked on any of those on sound. Everything changed.
Everybody that was in, was out. Actors, most of them, or a lot of
them, their voices were squeaky or something so that's when the
theatrical profession got into the business, because they knew that
end of it, theatrical directors. So all of we silent people were just
out in the cold, and that was why I made the switch-over.

CHERYL: I want to ask you how you became an employee of the Premium Picture
Company. I want to know things like your age, what date it was, and
what sequence of events led up to it.

SHIELDS: I think I was 23 years old. I had been out on location and came back
here. And I went out one day to talk to them and next picture they
made, they called me, and I worked every picture they made except, I
think, the last one that they made, and I was on location when they
made that. So I worked with Al Ferguson, was the director, and that
was the man that I worked with. I knew Fleming, but then, Fleming
was the producer, and so it was just to pass the time of day or
something when I talked to him. But I would start on the picture,
probably the first one hired, getting locations and props together and
getting a cast set up, and then I would work usually as assistant
director. And then if we shot an extra camera, or I was, I shot
second camera. And then when the film was finished, I would help cut
it and edit it. Al and I would cut it together. I did more splicing
than cutting, but then that was all part of it, and then brought it
off, then there'd be a few weeks off, and they'd start another one or
I'd work for somebody else. And I worked for Louis Moomaw and the
Johnsons, and all the pictures that were made up here. 'Course we had
two studios in Portland, but the big one was out in Beaverton.

CHERYL: Can you tell me if you started out as the assistant director? That
was your position as you started and ended?

SHIELDS: Uh-huh.

CHERYL: What were the years that you were at the company?

SHIELDS: I think I started in '23. I can't remember for sure. But I think
it was from '23 until about '20.... 1926.

CHERYL: Can you give me any idea of what your salary was during that period of time?

SHIELDS: (Laughing) Well, the salary varied from \$25 to \$150 a week. Out there on those, I think my salary was \$50 a week, if I remember it, which was pretty good money in the '20's.

CHERYL: My next question was to ask you about the variety of things you did on the job, I think you kind of answered that.

SHIELDS: Well, you did everything in those days, you were property man, you were assistant director, you were assistant production manager, and cameraman and assistant cameraman and whatever there was to be done.

CHERYL: Tell me every aspect of what the Premium Picture Company did, every aspect of their business.

SHIELDS: Well, they had made one picture before I went to work for them, and I think just one because I remember the _____ sheets were in the lobby. The people out there in Beaverton know more about that than I do. Mr. Cole knows more about it. In fact, Mr. Cole, I think, located a print of that picture from the Smithsonian Institute. They all know more about that and the people who lived out there than I did. And I don't even remember the names of the pictures that we made. We called them "horse opreys" or "galloping tintypes." They were mostly westerns, and outdoor pictures, Northwest Mounted Police and that type of thing, mostly Westerns. We shot a lot of location out around Tygh Valley and . . . so uh, J. J. Fleming was the producer and Al Ferguson was the director and wrote most of the stories and was the leading man. He was the leading man and the director. And I was usually . . . when I played a part, it was a juvenile, like a mounted policeman or a cowboy, or whatever. And those were really bit parts because I was too busy on the other, but I was just re-reading the story that Pement wrote in the Journal, which reminded me of some of the things. . . you can read that later, it came out in the Journal a couple, three years ago. _____ there were no unions in those days and we couldn't have existed with unions. The pictures would have cost so much more money that they wouldn't have been able to make them. They were just coming in about the time sound came in.

CHERYL: Can you tell me how the business got started?

SHIELDS: Yeah, J. J. Fleming promoted Doc Watts out of some money to build a studio, and Doc built it. Doc Watts owned the studio. Dr. . . . G. W., I think it was, Watts, I can't remember for sure his . . . it's around here somewhere, I think it's G. W. Watts, but I'm not sure, but anyway, Dr. Watts. His office was in the old Oregonian building, he lived up over _____ terrace. And he was quite wealthy, and uh, Doc and I were very good friends. In fact, we used a lot of his equipment when Stewart and I, when we'd make commercials. Go out and get Doc's big Mitchell camera, and his Graflex camera and so forth, and whatever we wanted, he'd just let us use them.

CHERYL: Can you tell me where it was located, where the building was?

SHIELDS: (Laughing) Ah, I . . . you know where the school is in Beaverton. You know the railroad and you've got two main streets? Well, you go up the main street till you come to the school. You turn to the left, and go down past the school, down the little hill and you start up and there was the studio. It's all different now, but it was kind of a swamp in there and there was a night club and there was the studio. But they tell me that the front of the studio is still there. I didn't recognize it, but a couple of years ago, I drove out there and I says, "Well, this has got to be where it was;" we turned the corner and went up, and I could see where some boards were pulled loose and the block tile, hollow tile, rather, was the lab, and I recognized that, so then I knew it had to be it, because we did have a lab there too for developing the film. I would say it was roughly three blocks or four blocks from Main Street or whatever that street is that goes past the school.

CHERYL: How many people worked for the company?

SHIELDS: Oh, well, sometimes you might have a couple of dozen extras. Well, let me see. You'd have a leading man and a leading lady, you'd have a heavy, you'd probably have a second heavy, that's four; then you'd have the cameraman, assistant cameraman and myself. That would be seven, and then a couple of grips. Oh, nine or ten would be an average working company. And then bringing in extras for the various parts of how many you've got in the cast, for instance, that could run up to a dozen or two or three dozen, or maybe three or four. It all depends on what the story calls for, and how many you've got in the cast. They would only be working for a short time. Very few would work clear through.

CHERYL: Can you tell me if there's anything that the company did other than making pictures?

SHIELDS: Not that I know of; I don't think so.

CHERYL: What are the jobs of the people who were there on a regular basis, other than the cast that was hired on?

SHIELDS: Well, I would say there were only three people on a steady payroll. That would have been Jack Fleming, his secretary and Al Ferguson, and I'm not even sure Al was on a steady salary, but I imagine he was.

CHERYL: So you weren't on a steady salary there?

SHIELDS: No, no, no. You never are in pictures, unless you belong to the company. You're only . . . when they're producing. For a long time, though, it was practically a steady salary because we'd finish one picture and start another one, maybe only a week off in between. Sometimes we'd start right away. But usually it was a few weeks, 'cause Al would have to write another story and line up another cast. And I would usually work on another picture somewhere. Sometimes you did, sometimes you didn't, that was the way the business went.

CHERYL: I'm interested in the kinds of equipment that they used to make the pictures. What sorts of things would there be?

SHIELDS: You had a camera, a silent camera that you cranked, usually a Bell & Howell or a Mitchell, and you had . . . outdoors we used reflectors. They would fold up. Like, oh, what about a 4 X 5 piece of veneer with a light frame on it, and that folded _____ and you pulled those out and you covered them with Tead.

(Interruption)

CHERYL: I was asking you about special equipment that was used.

SHIELDS: Oh, yeah. Well, as I said, the cameras, and the reflectors, which you used if you were shooting a _____, you could put that down to put under hats and so forth, to light the faces. Then in the studios, well, you used the kleigh lights and the spots. And that's about all the equipment you had, outside of your script and your story and . . .

CHERYL: How about putting it together afterwards?

SHIELDS: Afterwards, well, of course you had your script and you numbered every scene that you shot. And you spliced the various scenes together, clip the close-ups into the longshots, and so forth. And I got so's I could just hold film in my hand and do like that (motion that looks like shuffling film between thumbs) and have a motion picture. You know what motion picture film is, each frame, well, you get so's you could just do like that and get your action. But they use moviolas today for all that, and you look on the little screen. But we just looked at the picture, it's about that big, and you get so's you can just run it with your hand, and you can get your action. Like if it's a fist coming up to hit somebody, and then you cut to the close-up of the guy or whatever, and you rough cut and you put clips in and you get through, well then you set down and splice it. Sometimes Al would cut and I would splice.

CHERYL: What would you use to splice it?

SHIELDS: Well, we had what was called a Griswold Splicer, and you laid the . . . you had a track that you laid the film in, you come down with this thing that cut that film off, then you raised it up and put the other film in then come down and that cut that one off. But it cut one of 'em about that much (1/4" motion with fingers) longer than the other one and when you brought this one -- rather, you cut this one first. (Laughter) Then you cut this one, then when you put this one down, that lapped over, then you just run over a little brush with film cement and then brought this down on top and that clamped it and held it. Then there was a Bell & Howell hot splicer that made a hot splice, which was a better splice than a cold splice. I spliced thousands of feet of film without anything. You just cut it off and take your scissors -- in fact, I've got my cutting scissors down in the basement. They're about that size (picks up a small pair of

SHIELDS: (cont) scissors), you wet your film and you just _____ run along and slice the emulsion and put it down together and hold it with your fingers. Amalacetate and ether -- no, not ether -- it's like lacquer thinner, only it's . . . what's faster than lacquer thinner? Put those together. Or you can make it just taking that and celluloid and "melding" it up _____ . . . will make a film cement. Same as you'd buy if you were gonna make 16mm film; buy Bell & Howell cement at any photograph supply company.

CHERYL: It sounds like the equipment was very simple.

SHIELDS: Very simple. Basically, you had a camera and some sunlight. Inside, why you had kleigh lights. Why, the first one, like DeMille, when they went to Hollywood, their studio was open, they just had canvas over it and then they had a light-like cheesecloth, and that let a lot of soft light through. They didn't even have kleigh lights then.

CHERYL: Was your building special in any way?

SHIELDS: Oh, yeah, the studio building was built for a studio. I can't remember, but it was at least 200 feet long and a hundred feet wide, and it might have been 300 feet -- it's just so long ago. It was a big studio. We built a city street set in it, for Moomaw, which was a block long. A whole city street. New York street scene. So it was a good size. In fact with us out there _____ only used a small part of it. We could have a dozen sets setting around there and not have to build a new one. Which I've got a few shots of some of the sets.

CHERYL: I'm interested in the folks you sold the pictures to.

SHIELDS Well, they would sell the pictures to a distributing company. And like here in Portland, there was Mapes, and Mapes owned Star Distributing. And General Film was an independent distributor. In other words, they'd sell them the film, a print, for so much money. I think they had an agent in New York who sold it to various other ones. I wasn't interested in that end of it, so I don't know too much about it. But I do know that Mapes distributed them here, as Star Film.

CHERYL: Can you tell me how widely distributed the films were in general?

SHIELDS: Oh, I think they pretty well went all over the United States and they ran in the country theaters and little theaters like we had down on Burnside, the Circle Theater, and theaters like that. They never made first run. That's the ones that they made out there (in Beaverton). I worked on other pictures that did make first run, but you're talking about Beaverton.

CHERYL: What sort of contact did you have with the folks who worked on the films?

SHIELDS: Well, actors are people, and they're just as diversified as the people in your town or the people in your historical society, and so forth. They're all just human beings. Some of 'em are nice and some of 'em aren't so nice. Basically, they're just a bunch of people trying to make a living, and we'd get along fine. I had very few problems with anybody. Usually they're outgoing people, friendly and will do anything for you. Directors sometimes get a reputation for being rough, but usually that is only for an effect to get something _____. And as a director, you have to handle each person a little bit different, some people you have to shout at them and get 'em half mad to do a part, and others you don't. I remember once one scene we were making out in Beaverton. Bob McKim, who was quite a big star in his time, and we had a fight scene. And we had snow, and of course for snow we used powdered asbestos, which would be illegal today. Like you used for snow on Christmas trees and so forth in those days. And he didn't like it in there and it was a fight scene, and it was supposed to be in Alaska. In fact, it was a scene they forgot to shoot in Alaska. So I set it up in the studio here in Portland, and he wasn't gonna do it, and finally I got mad and I said, "Bob, you're either gonna fight him in there or you're gonna really fight me, and I won't pull any punches (laughter). So finally he decides to do it. I don't think that would have ever happened, but it was enough to get him to go in there and do it. And then I think of something -- you know who Boris Karloff is, of course, great heavy, we had him here on a picture. In fact, I think it was made in your studio, but it was a Louis Moomaw production. He was supposed to be an escapee from jail. They were after him and he swam on the Columbia River, and this was in November when it was pretty cold, out to the boat. We had a paddle wheel boat, something like the River Queen restaurant down here. Looked very much like that boat, only it had a paddle wheel. And we pulled him up _____ and gave him some coffee laced with whiskey, and he drank it down and I said to him, "All for the sake of art, huh, Boris?" He said, "Art, hell. Ham and eggs." (Laughter) And that's what it was. And he was just a little more than an extra then, just a feature player. Of course he came to be one of our greatest. Gene Herscholt was a quiet, reserved man, but still was an awfully nice person. They were all nice.

CHERYL: If you could tell me a little bit more about how pictures were done there, from the beginning to the end, including the people that did it, the materials, the time and the cost involved, and I also wanted to ask you if any of the work was contracted out.

SHIELDS: Yes, part of it. The developing of the film was usually contracted. They built the studio, the lab later, but I don't think they did but two or three pictures in that lab. And my friend Featherstone did that. Well, you start with, you get a story. Then you cast the story.

CHERYL: Wait, excuse me a minute. Where did the writers come from? Where did the stories come from?

SHIELDS: Oh, out of somebody's head. I think Al wrote all the stories, that is, out there. I've helped write stories. You used to write stories by maybe two or three people sitting around and start throwing ideas back and forth. And why don't we do this and what'll we do now, and what'll we do next,, and one thing suggests another thing, and that's the way the gagwriters work yet in Hollywood. They get two or three, maybe they have four. I think Johnny Carson, I think he has three or four writers. Bob Hope has three or four writers and they just start passing ideas back and forth, and each one says something, and hey, why not do this, and that suggests something else. But basically, Al would write the story and the script and the girl would type it all up for him and then they would say, well, now who will play this part and who will play that part. I have here an old casting book, which is 1924, so that goes back to then, and here are the people that are available that want to work in pictures. Then you'd thumb through that and you'd see who's available, and who you think will fit the part, then you contract for them to be here at such and such a date, and you've got your sets built and we had a couple of boys there at Beaverton that we hired, and then Gurney Hayes, who was the head of the theatrical union here in Portland. He finally went out there, and was on almost steady, come to think of it, in building sets and tearing them down and getting them ready. And he was good at it and he was good at papier mache. To make rocks and so forth or whatever, he was very good at that. And then you get your cameraman and you order your film and you shoot your picture and get your props and everything and you cut it and sell it and that's just about all it is.

CHERYL: Can you tell me the names of some of the pictures you made?

SHIELDS: I don't remember a name of any of them. (Looking through stills from pictures.) I don't think there's a name on the backs of these. I really don't remember them. That is, of the ones out there (at the Premium Picture Company). The last picture I worked on was The Exodus. That was the story of the Mormons going into Salt Lake City.

CHERYL: Tell me what led to the demise of the Premium Picture Company?

SHIELDS: I would say probably that Doc Watts got tired of putting up more money. Didn't make enough money and he quit. I'm sure that's it.

CHERYL: Tell me what the company did that was unique to the industry, if anything.

SHIELDS: Nothing. (Laughter) It's like everybody else did, they tried to make pictures that the public would like. And of course, these were cheapies; we called them "horse opreys." The same kind of picture that John Wayne was making when he started out. If you've ever seen any of these early John Wayne's. And I saw Al Ferguson on several of those and stars that we used or actors that we used, every once in a while I see one of those early John Wayne's made out of Republic Studios.

SHIELDS: I guess because of the fact that it was there (laughing). That's all I can say. It was the only studio that was in Washington County, and it's a part of the nostalgia of the past.

CHERYL: It was the only studio in how big of an area?

SHIELDS: Well, it was the only studio outside of the two smaller studios here in Portland, it was the only studio in Oregon. And only one other studio in the Northwest. There was a studio in Tacoma. Other than that, there was no studio north of Los Angeles or Hollywood. East, I don't know where you'd go to find one. There was none that I know of.

CHERYL: So it was the biggest studio in all of Oregon?

SHIELDS: Oh yes, by far. It was the only one that was built as a studio. The next largest was the American Lifograph Studio, which was Moomaw, which was right over here on 33rd and Halsey, which would be right in the middle of the new freeway. And that was a pretty good sized studio, but it was not built as a studio. It was some kind of a hall or something, I don't know. They had plenty of room in it as far as most sets but not for city streets or anything like that.

CHERYL: Is there anything else about the business that I didn't ask you that we might want to know?

SHIELDS: Well, I suppose that one of the most famous people that was out there and there's also . . . Madam Schuman-Heink, her son, Al Fleming, I guess you'd say promoted them and they made two pictures with Ferdinand Schuman-Heink out there. Madam Schuman-Heink owned a ranch out in Reedville. Of course, you know who she was, one of the greatest opera singers we ever had up to our time. She had two sons, one of them in the German army and one of them in the American army in World War I. Ferdinand and I became very good friends while he was here. I remember one incident at the cafe that's out there on Terwilliger Blvd. built then. And we were having lunch there, and she says to me, she says, "Is Ferdinand a good boy?" I says, "Sure, he is." "Does he do everything you tell him to?" I says, "Sure." She says, "Well, if he don't, you just get a two-by-four and smack him down." (Laughter) She was a good lady.

CHERYL: Is there anything else that you can think of? Tell me what you did after the talkies came out.

SHIELDS: Well, that's when Stewart and I developed the sound film and then he and I made the newsreel and commercial film. And then we made a picture called "Hisperia." They had a nudist camp up here on Squaw Mountain back of Gresham, and we made a picture of that in sound. I still have the sound equipment that we used, but that had nothing to do with Washington County, it never was out there.

CHERYL: At what point was the camera used by the Premium Picture Co.?

SHIELDS: It was used as second camera with Brownell on several pictures that they made out there. They'd hire "Brownie" as second cameraman and he'd furnish his camera. That was when it was a brand new camera. Brownie paid somewhere between thirteen hundred and fifteen hundred dollars for the camera then.

CHERYL: Can you tell me if the camera had any special ties to people, places or events?

SHIELDS: Well, Brownell probably made more commercial film than anybody else here in the Northwest, and he used that camera for practically all of that film. Then Piper and Heaton formed a partnership, and they shot the Oregon Sound News. Now that was a local newsreel. Your evening news is very much like the newsreels. That is, if you take the personal stuff out of it and the events that they cover. That's what you did, you covered if there was a fire or a parade or if they put up a store or a monument of something, whatever was going on, and the politicians, and the Toy and Joy Makers, whatever was going on, and so forth. For instance, just as an illustration, we were shooting a Toy and Joy Makers, that was with our sound film, and this camera. And George Baker was probably the best mayor Portland ever had. He was very much for the Toy and Joy Makers. So we went down and I can't remember his name right now -- anyway, he wanted to know if we wouldn't get the mayor to do it. So I called up George and his wife answered and she said, "Well, what did you want with him, Garry," and I told her. She says, "Well, I'll ask him, but I don't think he will, he isn't feeling well. Then she came back on the phone and she says, "Yes, you get your equipment all set up and he will be there" at such and such a time. And he came up and he had on pajamas, but then a lot of coats and things over it, but you couldn't tell. He stepped down and made a speech that made the tears run down because he was good at it, to get the donations for the Toy and Joy Makers. He got back in the car and three days later he died.

. . . .

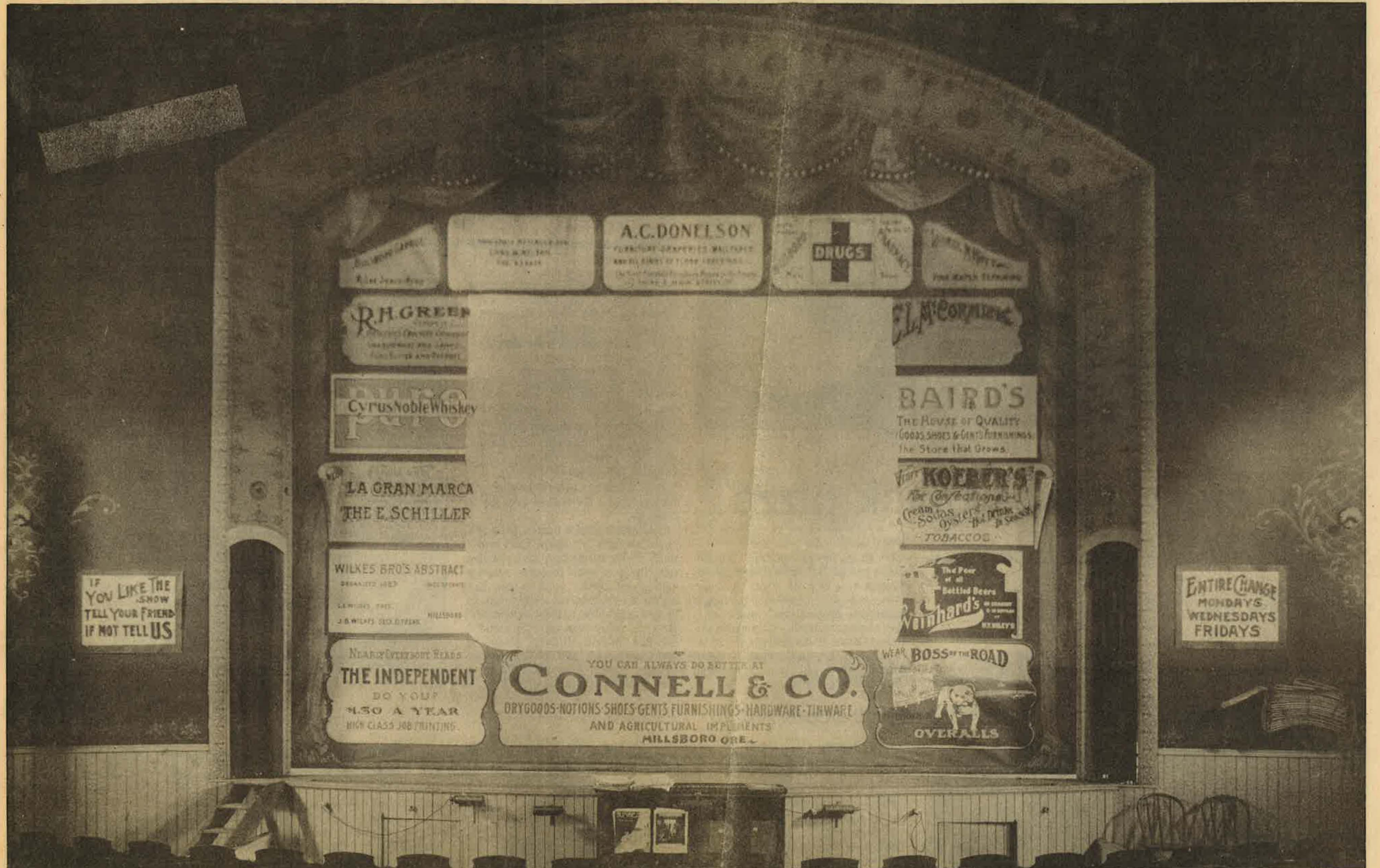
That camera shot a lot of newsreel for Piper and Heaton and then for us in sound. Two years of it. You put a whole reel or 10 minutes every week, and that's a lot of work all over the state. So that's the history of the camera. It is the only camera unless you could find the old Mitchell, and I don't suppose it's in existence any more. I have no idea what became of it. In fact, it was all liquidated and turned into an airplane hanger. And if you talk to Carr out at Carr Chevrolet, he can give you a lot of that history, more than I can.

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section **C**

Tuesday, Sept. 23, 1986



Hillsboro movie man Orange Phelps booked entertainment in the Crescent Theater. The 1906-vintage playhouse was on First and Main.

Photos courtesy of Vincent Phelps

Movie man brought jugglers, talkies to town

Orange Phelps was Mr. Theater in Hillsboro.

Phelps operated seven movie theaters at different times in his 77-year career. He operated Hillsboro's first movie theater, the Arcade; built the most lavish, the Venetian; and operated the city's last surviving movie house, the Towne, until selling it in 1978.

He was also a community leader, serving six years as mayor and organizing July 4 and other citywide festivities.

He died on Aug. 5, 1985, four months shy of his 100th birthday.

Friends and family members agree he was a remarkable person. "Pappy could out-think, out-negotiate, out-last any movie production company salesman in business dealings," said Vincent Phelps, 68, who worked beside his father for many years. "He knew more about operating movie theaters than any man I ever knew."

Orange Phelps was 23 when he came to Oregon. Born in California, he attended Hanover College in Indiana before deciding his future was back in the West.

He and a school chum, who had a financial interest in the Granite Hill mines near Grants Pass, worked in the mines in 1906.

When mining gave out, Phelps took a job with the state Fish and Wildlife Commission and, later, opened a roller skating rink in Grants Pass.

In 1908 he accepted an offer to open a "moving picture house" and decided Hillsboro was a good town for the enterprise.

For his first theater, the Arcade, he rented an old storehouse, located across the street from the present Town Theater, and converted it into a viewing room. It seated 108. Customers paid 5 cents a ticket to see the latest silent movie.

Vincent Phelps and his wife, Joy, recall the movies were only 10 minutes long. To hold his customers' interest while preparing the next reel, they said Orange Phelps would describe the next feature.

The theater owner also acted as booking agent for the Crescent Theatre, a stage and playhouse built in 1906 on the southeast corner of First and Main.

His fortunes were dented when his partner promptly left town one night with all the profits, said Vincent Phelps. To recover financially, Orange Phelps began showing movies in a tent in Shute Park and in 1910

took the show to Rockaway on the coast.

His big break came in 1913. J.W. Shute, who owned the Shute Bank on Main Street across from the Arcade, announced he was moving to the corner of Third and Main, now the site of the Book Case. He offered to sell the old building to Phelps.

When Phelps explained that he couldn't swing that sort of deal, Shute said the bank would loan him the money.

The new theater with its long lobby entrance became the Grande.

Jerri Doctor, who interviewed Phelps in 1976 for a special Bicentennial edition of the Argus, quoted him as saying the Grande "was a funny, skinny theater," only 19 feet wide and 120 feet long. It seated 200.

In 1915, Phelps widened the auditorium to accommodate 500 viewers and gave the place a new name, the Liberty. "There was a show there every night," said Phelps, who hired Vincent Engeldinger to play the theater organ.

Not content to operate only one movie house, Phelps leased the Majestic Theatre across the street and operated it in 1916 and 1917.

The next theater, and the one Phelps probably was most proud of, was the Venetian. Erected in 1925, it was built behind the Liberty.

Vincent Phelps said his father wanted a theater that would show first-run movies and could be used for high school plays and special events. Because the Venetian had a

'Pappy could out-think, out-negotiate, out-last any movie production company salesman in business dealings.'

good stage, dressing rooms and full storehouse basement, it could accommodate live variety shows. It seated 1,000.

The architect, who also had designed the elaborate Oriental and Egyptian theaters in Portland, decorated the Venetian with murals, fancy carpets and drapes. Orange

Phelps insisted on having top-quality lighting, film projection and sound systems, his son said.

"Pappy wanted a first rate theater for the community. He actually lost money on the live shows that came once a month and some of the big movies, but he did it for the city."

It was this community concern that motivated Orange Phelps in other areas. In 1921, he supervised the construction of the Shute Park pavilion, a center for dances and Fourth of July events.

In the 1930s, he also served six years as Hillsboro's mayor.

Phelps' final theater project was the Hill Theatre, built in 1937 on Third Avenue between Main and Lincoln streets. Vincent Phelps said his father came up with the idea of opening a 500-seat theater to show the best 52 movies of the year. The Venetian, then, ran the "B" movies as double features.

The Venetian burned in 1956 when an electric motor activating the stage curtains overheated. The stage and auditorium were destroyed. The lobby was saved and now is part of the Towne Theatre, built in 1957.

Film vendors bargained hard

The movie theater offered reels of entertainment to old-time Hillsboro residents, but it was a business, too—a new kind of business.

Vincent Phelps recalls that his father, Orange Phelps, in 1908 rented a projector and showed films in a converted storehouse. That was the Arcade, Hillsboro's first "theater."

Over the next five years, Orange Phelps operated similar operations at Shute Park and at the coast in Rockaway.

"Pappy used to take his money to Portland and buy (rent) the movies he wanted. It was a lot like renting video cassette movies today," said Vincent Phelps.

The silent movies were made in Europe and lasted about 10 minutes each. They were so popular in America, they killed vaudeville and the the traveling Chautauqua cultural shows.

In the late teens and 1920s, American movie makers joined the film industry. During their heyday, the companies produced about a film a week, said Vincent Phelps.

By that time, Orange Phelps had operated movie houses for 15 years and knew what his customers wanted.

Vincent Phelps explained that sales representatives of movie companies like MGM, RKO, Warner Brothers and Paramount negotiated annual contracts which included a year's worth of movies. Theater owners had to buy the entire stock, including films that were still on the drawing board.

"There always was a hodge-podge," said Vincent Phelps, "and Pappy always insisted on 'shelving rights.'" In other words, Orange

Phelps didn't show some of the movies he bought.

"We shelved more pictures than we ran," said Vincent Phelps.

Shortly after World War II, producers developed a new system of buying and selling films that changed the movie theater business, said Vincent Phelps.

A new federal regulation—called the "dissent decree"—permitted movie house operators to buy one movie at a time. The highest bidder bought the right to show the most popular movie. Usually big-money operators, not small-town theater owners, got the major attractions.

But Orange Phelps anticipated the turn of events in the film industry and diversified with Hillsboro's Venetian Theatre.

Built in 1925, the Venetian was a community entertainment center with first-rate sound and projection systems, a large pipe organ and a full stage. It could accommodate events ranging from traveling juggling troupes to the Hillsboro High School graduation exercises.

"When the traveling shows hit Portland, Pappy got them to come to Hillsboro, too. He never made any money on them. They usually played before the movie. But they helped to keep Hillsboro people in Hillsboro," said Vincent Phelps.

When the first sound movies—"talkies"—were available, Phelps promoted them to the hilt. He showed "Broadway Melodies" on May 2, 1929, to a full house of 1,000. Several hundred people had to be turned away.

When "Gone With the Wind" played in Hillsboro, Phelps negotiated to show it three

weeks consecutively.

In the 1930s movie-going was so popular, said Vincent Phelps, that "everybody" came to town Saturday night. The downtown stayed open for business until 10:30 p.m., and the Venetian began showing a "midnight preview."

In 1937, Orange Phelps and Harry Hill built the Hill Theatre on Third Avenue between Main and Lincoln streets. The Hill, with a seating capacity of 500, showed first-rate movies, and the Venetian carried the "twin-bills."

One of Vincent Phelps' first jobs in the family business was driving throughout Hillsboro and posting "bills" to advertise the movies. Double features required twin-bills.

These advertising ploys didn't help the small-town theater owners in their dealings with the movie producers, who demanded a percentage of the gross admission receipts.

Usually producers kept 20 to 30 percent of the gate. Occasionally, for such blockbusters as "Gone With the Wind," producers took half the ticket proceeds, 75 percent for the first week of showing.

After World War II, negotiating for movies became such a critical part of the theater business that Phelps decided he and other small operators needed to band together. He formed a cooperative of theater owners in the metropolitan area and hired a professional movie buyer for the group.

The cooperative succeeded because the buyer could guarantee a movie would be shown for several consecutive weeks, a difficult promise for Portland's big movie houses to match, said Vincent Phelps.



The Venetian, Hillsboro's most lavish theater, seated 1,000.

Stories by Bill Chidester

Silence was golden

Portlander made reel life dramas

By JACK PEMENT
Journal Staff Writer

In the years when Hollywood's hold on the movie industry was still tenuous, Portland was a thriving film capital in its own right.

Garry H. Shields has the souvenirs to prove it. The attic of his home in Laurelhurst, where he has lived since 1920, is filled with photographs, newspaper clippings and mechanical equipment that date back to the days of the silent screen and his personal career as a technician, assistant producer and reluctant actor.

"In the 1920s anybody who could get a few thousand dollars together, or sometimes even a few hundred, was eager to get into the motion picture business," recalls Shields. "It wasn't difficult to get started if you had the capital. Why, you could produce a five-reel picture for \$4,000 to \$5,000."

Shields was a mechanically minded young man who had been interested in photography since his school days. He drifted into the motion picture world as a hand-cranking cameraman, but he more often than not found himself engaged by a

Among the studios doing business locally were the Sunbeam Film Co., which specialized in one-reel comedies; the Moomaw Studios, which operated the Lifeograph plant at NE 33rd Avenue and Halsey Street; Josh Benny Comedies, which used the Lifeograph facilities, and the big Premiere Studio in Beaverton, operating as J. J. Fleming Productions.

At one time or another Shields worked for all of them. He rejoiced in the technical aspects of the job, but he shuddered each time he found himself being pressed into emergency service as an actor.

"I didn't have major roles or anything like that, of course," said Shields. "I would get wished into playing parts like chauffeurs and poker players and the like because some performer would fail to show up or some last-minute change in the script required an extra face in a scene. I don't know how many times I've been shot dead in a second reel.

"Once I even had to double for a dummy. The dummy was being pummeled under the hoofs of cattle, and in one close-up I was called on to roll painfully over and stare at the camera with a look of agony on my face."

One memorable movie that Shields



WAY IT WAS — This was the way Cascade Locks looked in 1923 before the great dams of the Columbia River came into being. Pauline Curley and Al

Ferguson, starring performers whose roles in a now forgotten movie required them to venture into the turbulent water, almost drowned while commencing

turning. Members of the movie crew had to rescue them with the help of a rope and linked hands.



SOPHISTICATED — This hand-cranked Chronik movie camera cost \$1,500 new in 1922. Garry H. Shields, at its controls, bought it used from H.

H. Brownell, pioneer film maker of Portland. Shields plans to give it to the Oregon Historical Society.

BOB BACH/Oregon Journal



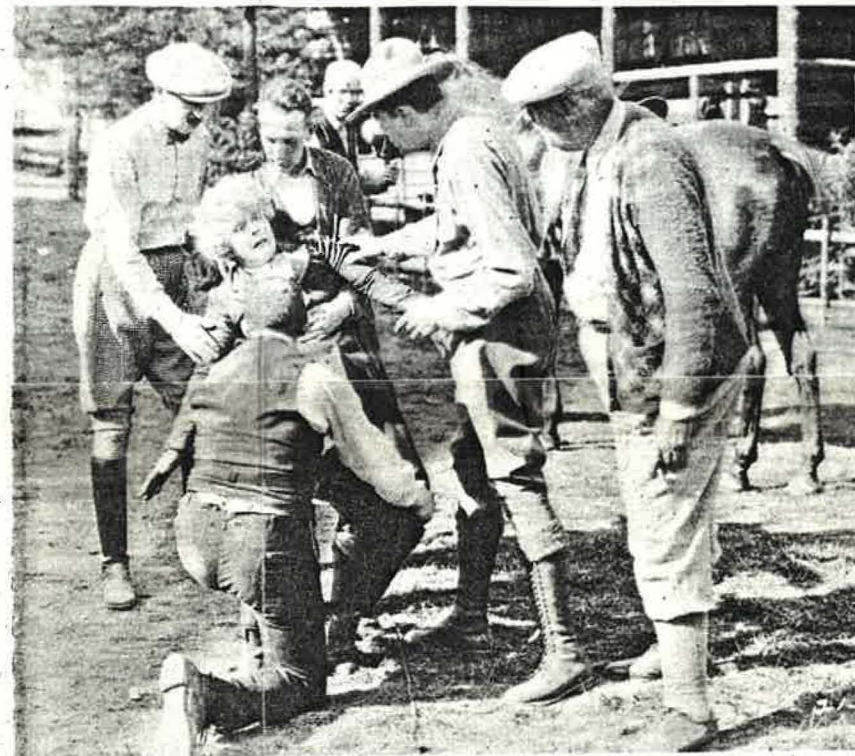
ON LOCATION — In 1924 this film crew from Portland packed up and moved to Oak Ridge in the Cascade mountains to do location scenes for a rail-roading epic. Here cast and technicians enjoy a luncheon respite. At the extreme left is Jean Hersholt, an actor who would go on to greater things. In the

center, in ranger's hat, is Eugene O'Brien, a leading man who could command an astounding \$3,500 a week for his services. At his right is Carlo Fiesia, who helped performers emote by playing on an accordion. Shields, seated on rail bed, a sandwich in hand, was an assistant producer of the movie.



OLD FRIEND — Marie Prevost, one of the top stars of the day, inscribed this glamour portrait to Shields, who worked with her as an assistant producer and sometime actor.

ABJECT HORROR — For a 1924 classic called "Flames," actress Cissy Fitzgerald was supposed to ride into civilization on a horse, express a look of terror, breathlessly report a forest fire nearby and then swoon. Shields was pressed into service as a performer to help see that valuable Cissy didn't hurt herself in "fainting." He's the hatless one against whom the star has fallen. To simulate the forest fire, the crew moved a bunch of logs into Sullivan's Gulch and touched a match to them.



have to do have to offer him a little vino and he would perform all night while we were partying."

Among the early film stars who worked for Portland studios were Al Ferguson, Pauline Curley, Bryant Washburn, Boris Karloff, Ben Lyon, Jean Hersholt, Theodore Roberts and Marie Prevost.

Shields' chests of souvenirs include photographs of all of these performers and many more, most of them taken on sets or locations for movies in which he had a hand.

When he wasn't busy in the world of make-believe film-making, Shields shot both still and motion pictures for various news organizations. The photographs he took of child butcherer William Hickman while working for the International News Service and the Oregon Journal as a freelance provided him his largest scoop. Hickman was captured near Pendleton, and Shields' pictures of him freshly in custody were published nationally.

Shields had drifted away from the business of photography by the beginning of World War II. He entered the electrical manufacturing business and also put on the market a telescopic lawn sprinkler of his own design. In recent years, retired but still tinkering in his basement shop, he has devoted himself to service on the Citizens Advisory Committee on the Banfield Transit Way Project. Also, he recently completed a term as president of the Laurelhurst Neighborhood Association.

His movie years provide him many fond memories and few regrets now.

"It was the beginning of something very big," he said, "and I am glad I was there to see it unfolding. There was a lot of hard work, there were long days and many frustrations, but there was sure a lot of fun in it, too, along the way."

All the silent movies in which Shields had a hand were produced on nitrate film, which with age cracks, turns powdery and grows explosively dangerous. For some years Shields had some 200,000 feet of the old film stored in his basement, but he finally disposed of it for precautionary reasons without copying it.

To Shields' knowledge no one else ever bothered to preserve any of those old Westerns and comedies by transferring the original prints to safety film. He thinks it just as well.

"As I recall it now, none of those movies was meant for posterity," he said with a chuckle.