

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, September 15, 2008

Clarence Marshall's Picture Shows: In 1897, when Clarence was 12 years old, he wanted to become a photographer. With tutoring from a distant cousin, Horace Dilworth, he had a Sears Roebuck reflex camera with wooden case and holders for dry-plate negatives. Some of his first pictures were taken of local scenes and people on Stanley Dry Plates; many of these are displayed in the museum at Auburn Heights. Over the years, his cameras improved, and he kept up with the latest in amateur photography. He was the "official" family photographer, taking group pictures at reunions and anniversaries.

When "home movies" became possible in the mid-1920s, Clarence bought the best Bell & Howell equipment: 16 mm. movie cameras and projectors. Unfortunately, one of his subjects was his son from the time I was one year old. Photographing family Easter egg hunts, children at Rehoboth, and action shots while on motor trips, became an important hobby.

It seemed when I was growing up nearly every evening party at Auburn Heights included a picture show in the long living room. A screen would be put on top of the radiator at one end of the room, and the projector stand, built by Clarence, would be at the proper distance away, sometimes (depending on the projector lens) at the back of the room, near the dining room. Chairs would be arranged facing the screen. The "shows" were supposed to entertain adults as well as children. In addition to the home movies, some professional silent films would be shown, as they were available for a few dollars. Among these were biographies of Washington and Lincoln, the Hindenburg Disaster, the Century of Progress Exposition (Chicago, 1933-34), Burton Holmes' Travelogues, and the Fair of the Iron Horse (Baltimore, 1927). In the mid-30s, Clarence bought a Bell & Howell Filmosound Projector and was able to show sound movies; the most popular one was about Stephen Foster.

At our summer cottage on Queen Street in Rehoboth, a weekly "Movie Show" would be put on for the kids who lived on St. Lawrence, Queen, and Prospect Streets. As soon as darkness fell on the appointed nights, about 15 youngsters from five to 15 years of age, would sit on the floor in the living room watching Clarence's movies. Repetition of subject material was no problem. Those in the audience would often see themselves doing all sorts of things at the shore, and cartoons such as "Felix the Cat" and "Mickey Mouse" and the comedy "The Iron Mule" could be watched time after time. I guess my mother would serve cookies, but of this I am not sure. The Blue Hen Theatre was on Rehoboth Avenue, and there were two merry-go-rounds, but these cost money; Clarence's picture shows were free.

Like my father, I enjoyed amateur photography when I was young, and I took a few movies with his old camera starting about 1938. It was much more fun to develop and print pictures in his 3rd-floor darkroom than it was to do homework. Having run a projector for our squadron on Guam just after V-J Day in 1945, I operated the Club House Theatre in Yorklyn for two winters after World War II. I last took 16 mm. movies with my father's old camera in 1980.