

HOLLYWOOD NORTH

A Tale of What Might Have Been

For a brief shining moment in the summer of 1916, the Town of Perth stood on the brink of fame and fortune when “*the only moving picture manufacturing company established in Canada*”¹ came knocking.

Under the headline “*Moving Picture Industry*”, the *Perth Courier* edition of June 30, 1916, detailed an offer presented that week at a Town Hall public meeting.

Recently Mr. George W. Brownridge of the Canadian National Features Company, was in town in connection with the location of the company here in the old agricultural hall “... for the purpose of making motion pictures”.

Mr. Brownridge, in speaking to a number of citizens in the Council Chamber, said the company officers were: President J. Shea of Shea’s Theatre Company; Vice-president, G. W. Brownridge; Secretary Treasurer, E. J. Willis; and other directors, William Cranstoun and Mrs. A. Roberts. The company had an authorized capital of \$500,000, of which \$250,000 was fully paid up, and if it located in the agricultural hall they would want a five year lease, free rental, with the option of buying the hall at the end of five years. The company would also want free light, water, and heat during this time.

In return the company would undertake to expend immediately from fifteen to twenty thousand dollars in plant and equipment; to employ from at least 40 to 50 persons; to have a payroll of approximately \$100,000 yearly, and to start with a deposit of \$30,000 in a bank in Perth. As a matter of fact, however, the company, when it had actually started to make its pictures, would at times have four and five hundred people engaged in producing the pictures.

Already the company has contracts to the extent of \$100,000, and intends to cater to the European market, which is rapidly developing a desire for Canadian scenes and players on the screen. This is the only moving picture manufacturing company established in Canada and therefore has a brilliant chance to succeed when it is alone in the field of producing Canadian scenes. Although there are over a thousand similar concerns in the United States, not one of them is producing Canadian pictures exclusively, and they are all, to a great extent, dealing with the home market. Mr. Brownridge laid before the citizens the advantages such a concern would give to Perth in extensive advertising, the Canadian National Features pictures going all over the world with the name of Perth on them.

¹ *Perth Courier*, June 30, 1916.

In regard to fixing up the agricultural hall, it was figured necessary to make an initial outlay of \$3,000 for the improvements and after that an annual outlay of \$900 per year for water, light and heating.

The motion picture business has had a remarkable development in the States, with millions of money invested, and thousands of people employed.

The Mayor² summed the matter up in two points, namely: "Did the industry appeal to the people as a good proposition, and was it feasible for the town to take up with the company financially?"

The proposition was finally left in the hands of a committee composed of four: Messrs. C. J. Foy³, F. W. Hall⁴, Dr. Dwyer⁵, and H. M. Shaw⁶.

Looking back over the intervening 100 years the proposition may appear preposterous and an attempt by big city hustlers to scam a small town. However, Brownridge and his partners were, in fact, reputable and serious businessmen. Risky as the venture was, CNFC vice president George William Brownridge and his partners were committed to creating a Canadian movie production business -- and they had raised the funding to do it.

Brownridge was a film distributor and promoter in Toronto⁷ where he had been born in 1889. Company president Jeremiah Joseph 'Jerry' Shea (1864-1943), another Toronto native, in partnership with his brother Michael (1859-1934), had just completed building Toronto's largest vaudeville and cinema theatre.⁸ Shea's Hippodrome, at the corner of Bay and Albert Streets (now Nathan Philips Square) cost \$245,000 and boasted 3,200 seats. Within a few years the Shea brothers owned two more theatres in Toronto and another 23 in Buffalo.



Shea's Hippodrome - 1914

² The Mayor of the day was James J. Hands (1866-1937).

³ Charles James Foy (1867-1927), Perth Mayor 1905-1906, Reeve 1908-1916, Lanark County Warden, 1909.

⁴ Francis William Hall (1871-1959), Perth Mayor 1909-1912, President of the Perth Shoe Company 1912-1916, MLA for Lanark South 1914-1919. Hall was found guilty of theft in 1927 and sentenced to 18 months in prison.

⁵ Dr. Andrew W. P. Dwyer (1860-1939), physician and member of Perth Board of Trade.

⁶ Henry Montague Shaw (1866-1931), Perth Mayor 1907-1908, Lanark County, Warden 1926.

⁷ Census and border records describe his profession as a 'promoter' or 'public relations'.

⁸ Opened April 27, 1914.

Still in its infancy in 1916, the motion picture industry might be said to have begun with Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope parlors, which had proven a commercial success by 1893. The first projected moving pictures seen by a paying audience were those of the Lumière brothers, presented in Paris in December 1895. In 1908 one of the first narrative movies, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, was shot in Chicago and Hollywood and in 1911 the first Hollywood studio⁹ was established.

By 1914 there were national film industries established in Europe and the United States, but the production of feature films did not develop in Canada, in large part due to limited access to technology. Lumière and Edison maintained tight control over on their technology and in the United States a powerful trust group, the Motion Picture Patents Association (MPPA)¹⁰, formed in 1908, pooled their patents on film, camera and projector technology and thus controlled the production, distribution, and exhibition of motion pictures. MPPA control in the USA was extended to Canada by its refusal to sell to Canadian producers unless they were licensed by the MPPA.

Despite these constraints the Canadian Bioscope Company of Halifax did produced *Evangeline* in 1913 and six more films in 1914, but that company was dissolved with the outbreak of World War One (WW1).

**MOVIE PLANT BURNED:
BAD FIRE AT SWANSEA**

Beury Feature Film Outfit Destroyed—Havana Fight Pictures Escaped

Toronto's movie plant is gone. More than \$100,000 loss was occasioned when the plant of the Beury Feature Film Company, Windermere avenue, Swansea, was demolished by fire last night. Commencing between 8.10 and 8.20 p.m. on the roof of the plant, the fire soon swept the large building to ruins, destroying most of the costumes of fifteen actors and actresses, who were employed there in a large reform picture. Owing to the distance from a hydrant, the city firemen were of little service. The plant was built by the Conness-Till Film Co. one year ago. A short time ago this firm got into financial difficulties, and the business was taken over by the Beury Feature Film Co. James Beury of Philadelphia, E. H. Robbins and A. Macdonald of Toronto are the members of the firm. Mr. Beury was notified by wire last night concerning the fire, and in succeeded to arrive in Toronto as soon as possible.

An Up-to-date Plant.
The cause of the fire was given as defective wiring. When the lighting system was installed at an expense of \$2,000, it was supposed to be first-class and obtainable. The theatre was closed to the Havana Fight and costumes and equipment valued high in the new industry that now caters to the millions.

Then, in 1915, the roadblocks inhibiting a Canadian film industry were lifted when the MPPA monopoly came to an end, broken up by American government 'trust busters. At the same time anti-American sentiment in Canada, as manifest in the 1911 election's rejection of free trade, was growing stronger on a rising tide of patriotism aroused by WW1.¹¹ Film censorship boards, established between 1911 and 1913 in Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba, Alberta, and British Columbia, went so far as to ban or censor films that contained any "unnecessary display of U.S. flags".¹²

With American technology readily available and a receptive audience demanding Canadian content, the Conness-Till Film Company established Beury Feature Film studio at Toronto. However, after releasing a single film, the Beury studio burned to the ground on May 31, 1915. With the Canadian sphere at least temporarily cleared of all competitors, George Brownridge and Jerry Shea stepped in to pick up the pieces. They launched the Canadian National Features Company in June 1916, promoting it as a national venture and the alternative to the American film industry.

Harvey Webb Chamberlain (1871-1943), one of the unemployed actors who had appeared in Conness-Till's only release, *The Morland Mystery*¹³, was recruited by CNFC to act in their films and help promote the new enterprise. He was no doubt glad of the job because, when the Beury studio burned, "he lost two trunks of an elegant wardrobe valued at over \$500".¹⁴

⁹ Nestor Studios. In the same year 15 more independent studios set up in Hollywood.

¹⁰ Comprised of Edison, Vitagraph, Biograph, Kalem, Lubin, Selig, Essanay, Pathé Exchange, Melies, Gaumont, and others.

¹¹ As Brownridge was promoting Hollywood North, Canadian troops were fighting on the Ypres salient in Belgium (Battle of Mount Sorrel, June 2-13, 1916).

¹² *Canadianfilm.ca*, January 10, 2022, *The Origin of Motion Picture Production in Canada*, by Greg Eamon.

¹³ Released April 7, 1915.

¹⁴ *Perth Courier*, June 4, 1915.

Chamberlain had been born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and took up acting as a young man. That career brought him to Canada in the 1890s and then to Perth in 1904 as a member of the locally based 'Marks Brothers No. A-1 Theatre Company', managed by Joseph Marks (1861-1944).¹⁵ In 1906, Chamberlain married Perth native Louise Cristobal McCormack (b.1880), the daughter of local freight agent and telegraph operator Joseph Edward McCormack (b.1857) and his wife Margaret Laurie (1859-1925).

The Chamberlains chose to reside at Perth although Webb Chamberlain continued to travel extensively¹⁶, "*a well-known figure on the legitimate stage [performing] in the larger cities from coast to coast in Canada and the United States [where] his name ranked well up among the old-time actors*".¹⁷ In addition to 'treading the boards', Chamberlain was also a playwright, author, and illustrator. In 1910 Louise Chamberlain gave birth to a daughter, Jane Margaret Louise.¹⁸ While Webb was on the road, Louise and Jane usually remained at Perth where Louise was the highly regarded organist and choir director at Asbury Methodist Church. The Chamberlains spent summers at 'Rustic Lodge', a cottage they built on Christie Lake, part of the Marks Brothers colony. They named their motor launch 'Jane' for their daughter.

When George Brownridge made his pitch to the meeting at Town Hall in June 1916, he was actually making his second visit to Perth. The idea that Perth might host the CNFC studio had begun the previous February when Webb Chamberlain proposed the fairgrounds and its exhibit hall.

Mr. Webb Chamberlain of town has been engaged by the Canadian National Features Company, manufacturers of motion picture films, as a movie actor. Mr. Chamberlain was engaged with the Conness-Till Company of Toronto for some time in the capacity when fire visited the premises of that firm in Toronto ... Since that time a new firm company is being organized with a capitalization of \$500,000, having behind it some of America's prominent film manufacturers, and will be known as the Canadian National Features Company.

*This is a new firm ... but those behind it are men of considerable experience, and, of course, they have the money to develop their new enterprise. This firm is on the outlook for a suitable town or city in which to establish themselves, and knowing this, Mr. Chamberlain communicated with them in connection with locating in Perth, having in view the old fair grounds and the agricultural hall situated there. The firm replied, saying they were willing to look over the town ...*¹⁹

¹⁵ 'Canada's Kings of Repertoire' comprised Bathurst Township brothers Robert W. (1855-1937), Thomas H. (1857-1936), Joseph E. (1861-1944), Ernest A. E. (1879-1952), McIntyre (1871-1920) and Alexander (1867-1914). The first four named annually led troupes of vaudeville performers across Canada and the northern USA from the 1870s into the 1920s.

¹⁶ In addition to performing with various Marks Brothers troupes, Chamberlain worked, from time to time, with the Robbins Royal Alexander Theatre, the Imperial Stock Company, the Avalon Players, Oscar O'Shea's Players, and others. For a time, in partnership with Frank Charles Priestland (1881-1925), he also operated his own touring company.

¹⁷ *Ottawa Journal*, April 9, 1943 – Obituary.

¹⁸ Married Raymond Nicholson Lowes (1911-2007) in 1932.

¹⁹ *Perth Courier*, February 18, 1916.

As arranged by Chamberlain, on February 16, 1916, Brownridge visited Perth for the first time. He surveyed the fairgrounds, toured the town, and in a meeting later that day with the Board of Trade said he “*was very much impressed*” with the town’s capabilities, “*but in looking over the exhibition building found that it would have to be renovated while other buildings would have to be erected on the ground*”.²⁰ He outlined the terms CNFC would ask to establish a production studio at Perth.

The exhibition building would have to be fixed up. The grounds would have to be free of rental and taxation. Free lights would also have to be furnished by the town. The company would want an option on the property for a number of years and would want the chance of buying this property at the end of the term at its present valuation, and not what it would be valued at when it had been improved.

In connection with the improvements to the exhibition building, it would have to be wired and a water system installed, while the interior would need sheeting and made warm for winter months.

*In the event of satisfactory arrangements being made between the town and company, operations would begin about the first of next April.*²¹



South Lanark Agricultural Society Exhibition Hall
(Courtesy Perth & District Agricultural Society)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

It might seem curious that CNFC did not establish in Toronto or Montreal or some other large city but, as was common at the time, they were looking for a small town that would, in effect, become their financial partner. At Perth, CNFC was making a big 'ask' but adapting the agricultural/exhibition hall and grounds to accommodate a film studio, was regarded by the Board of Trade as a negotiable proposition.²² Board president Charles J. Foy opined that the *"manufacturing of motion picture films was a developing industry and the field here was a ripe one for just such an industry when the natural scenery and lakes were taken into consideration"*. After some discussion the Board agreed to appoint a committee to present the offer to Town Council -- Colonel James M. Balderson²³, Neil B. Nicol²⁴, George S. James²⁵, John A. Stewart²⁶, Frederick A. Girdwood²⁷, Walter W. Walker²⁸, and Francis W. Hall.



Perth Fairgrounds 1874-1911

Located between Lewis Street and the Tay River, west of Kippen Street, the 'old agricultural hall' was a substantial structure on the grounds of the South Lanark Agricultural Society (SLAS) used for its annual fall fair from 1891 until 1912 when the fair moved to its present location between Rodgers Road and Arthur Street. Also known as the 'exhibition hall', it was originally constructed in 1874 on a previous fair site at Greenley's Corners (Highway #7 and Wilson Street). Built in the shape of a cross, its main section was 70 feet in length, each of the two wings were 20 feet long and it was topped by a tower or cupola rising above the roof at its center. The structure was either moved to the Kippen Street site, or torn down and reconstructed with modifications, there in 1891.

Although Brownridge and Chamberlain made their pitch to the Board of Trade and, through that body, to Town Council, the fairgrounds and exhibition hall were actually owned by the SLAS. But local press reports make no mention of the CNFC meeting with the SLAS. Such a meeting was apparently seen as unnecessary as everyone knew that the SLAS had been looking for a buyer since 1912 and the real issue at stake was the subsidy requested of the town. Also, in 1916, Charles Foy was, simultaneously, an SLAS board member, Board of Trade President, and Perth's Deputy-Reeve. Further, SLAS board member Thomas J. Devlin (1864-1937) also sat on Town Council. These men were doubtless regarded as wearing all of their hats at the same time when they met with the movie producers.

²² It would probably have been better in many ways for CNFC to establish in Toronto or Montreal or some other large city but, as was common at the time, they were looking for a town that would, in effect, become their financial partner.

²³ Lt. Col. James Morris Balderson (1862-1943). Proprietor of Perth's Balderson Theatre which had opened in August 1915.

²⁴ Neil B. Nicol (1881-1943), hardware merchant.

²⁵ George Sutton James (1868-1964), foundry owner, hardware merchant.

²⁶ John Alexander Stewart (1867-1922), lawyer, Perth Mayor 1900-1904, businessman, MP, Cabinet Minister.

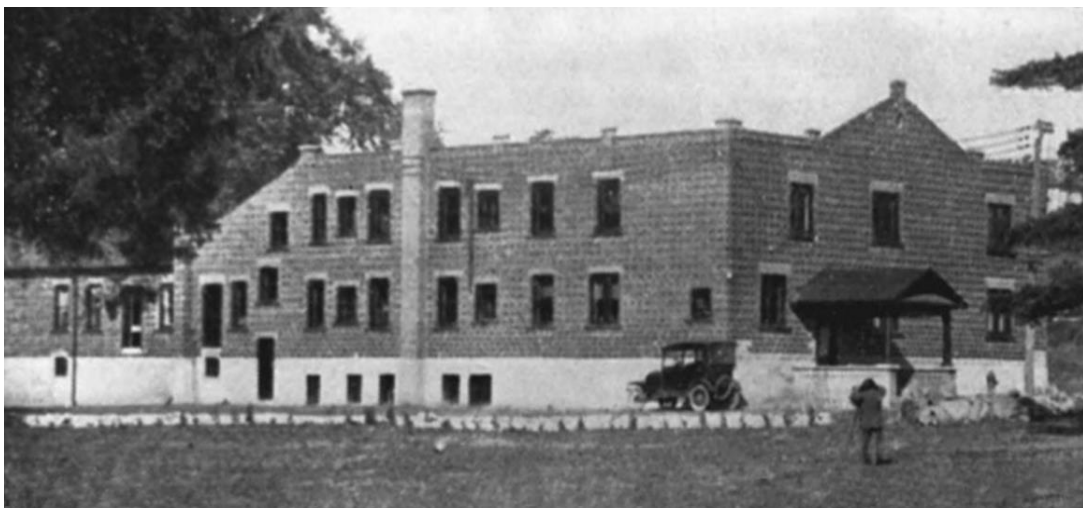
²⁷ Frederick Albert Girdwood (1878-1931), pharmacist.

²⁸ Walter William Walker (1870-1942), publisher of the Perth Courier 1901-1934.

Brownridge returned to Perth in early June, by which time he also had the municipalities of Kingston, Napanee and Trenton in play. He made his final pitch to a public meeting at Town Hall, but Perth moved too slowly. Six months later CNFC began construction of its production facility at Trenton.

By the spring of 1917 a two-story studio complex had been completed, as well as two large houses for cast and crew and an open-air stage. Later that year, with a cast and crew from Canada and the U.S., including Webb Chamberlain, Brownridge began shooting two features, *The Marriage Trap* and *Power*. Before *Power* could be completed, however, CNFC ran out of funds and suspended operations. In 1918 the Trenton facility was leased to the Pan American Film Corporation, but, after a single release, that company went under as well. Brownridge returned in 1919 with a new company, the Adanac Film Production Company. He completed *The Marriage Trap* and produced just one more feature, *The Great Shadow*, directed by Harley Knoles (1880-1936) and starring Tyron Power Sr. (1869-1931), Donald Hall (1867-1948) and Dorothy Bernard (1890-1955).

In 1923, Brownridge sold the Trenton studio to the Ontario Government Motion Picture Bureau (OGMPG)²⁹ for \$30,000. Provincial Treasurer W. H. Price explained the province wanted to produce Canadian films without a “*foreign tinge ... pictures breathing more Canadian sentiment and ideals*”.³⁰ Over the next decade, the OGMPB released more than 1,500 silent films but in 1934, as one of many depression era cuts, Ontario Premier Mitch Hepburn (1896-1953) ordered the facility closed and the facility was donated to the Town of Trenton. After serving as a community center, today it houses a dry cleaning business.



Canadian National Features Company Studio
(Courtesy Ontario Archives)

Shortly after the demise of his Adanac Film Production Company in the mid-1920s, George W. Brownridge moved to New York where, according to census records, he worked as an advertising executive. He lived at various addresses in Westchester County and died some time after 1952.

²⁹ The first state-founded film organization in the world, OGMPB was mandated to carry out educational work for farmers, school children, factory workers and other classes, to promote the province and its resources, to encourage the building of highways and other public works, and to counter the growing tide of un-British pictures being shown in theatres throughout the province.

³⁰ *The Globe*, November 15, 1923.

Webb Chamberlain made Perth his primary residence for a quarter century until he and his family moved to Toronto in 1928 and then to Ottawa in 1930. He died there in 1943 and was buried in Notre Dame Cemetery.

In early 1918 the agricultural fair grounds were sold to an investor syndicate that undertook development of a 50-lot subdivision called Fairholm Park. New streets were laid out intersecting the site -- Alvin, Clyde, Sinclair, and Glascott as an extension of D'Arcy street. On April 26, 1918 the *Perth Courier* reported that "*the work of taking down the old buildings and clearing up the land is processing well*". In July the lumber salvaged from what might have been the main stage of Hollywood North was sold at public auction.

- **Ron W. Shaw 2023**