

## MOUNTAIN MEMORIES IN OLD THEATERS

by Robert Williamson

Last month my neighbors, Bob and Sharon Long, told me how interesting my "Mountain Memories" column is to read, especially the story about the Incline Railway accident in 1914. They wondered about the source of my heritage ideas. I told them that a lot of story material just "drops into my lap" by chance from readers. The Incline Railway reminded Sharon about how her father as a boy used it to deliver movies from downtown theaters to a new theatre on Concession Street in the 1920s. I said, "How interesting! I think you have just given me a story idea." Sharon laughed and said, "Are you kidding me?"

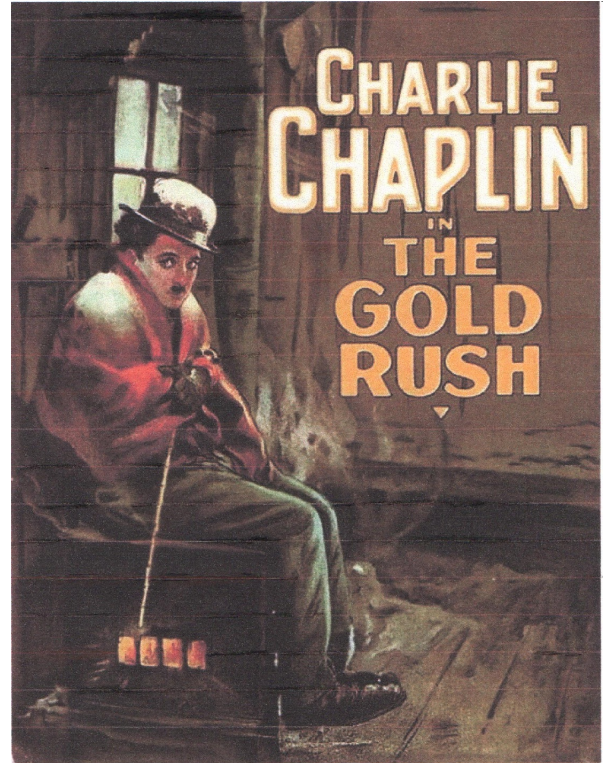
No Kidding! By pulling together a collection of heritage facts from the Public Library Archives and coincidental personal circumstances, I created an interesting Mountain Memory. The Lyceum movie theatre at 526 Concession Street opened in 1920, just two blocks from the upper terminal of the Wentworth Street Incline. That was the same year that Sharon's father, Peter McIsaac, arrived in Canada as an eleven year old boy from Scotland. The immigrant family eventually bought a house on Balmoral Avenue, just south of Barton Street. The Maple Leaf Amusement Park was only a few blocks away on the corner of Barton and Ottawa streets. It was a major entertainment site with a racetrack, the jockey club, a golf course, and a fairground for wild west Buffalo Bill western shows. The locale also had one of the first theaters in Hamilton to introduce the Edison Kinetograph projector for silent motion pictures. It may have been the Queen's Theatre built in 1912 at 1065 Barton Street East by theatre entrepreneur, Fred Guest, a member of the Masonic Lodge. Sharon noted coincidentally that her father later joined the same lodge as an adult.

Sharon remembers her father telling stories about how as a teenager in 1925, he delivered movies between the Lyceum theatre and probably the Queen's Theatre near his home for five cents a trip. He rode his bicycle with a big metal front carrier to hold the large three or four reels of film. It stands to reason that he would use the incline railway or what he called the "Jitney", slang for a nickle ride, to ascend the escarpment. However, children and students only paid one penny.

This is a sample of some of the featured film stars and their iconic silent movies that Peter McIsaac may have transported between theaters in the mid 1920s. The list is fascinating and includes memorable names:

- Rudolph Valentino in THE SHEIK,
- John Barrymore in DR. JEKYLL & MR. HYDE,
- Lon Chaney HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME,
- Charlie Chaplin's prospector in THE GOLD RUSH,
- Mary Pickford in LITTLE ANNIE ROONEY,
- Buster Keaton in a comedy entitled GO WEST.

The first film Academy Awards did not take place until 1929 with WINGS as the best picture. However, in 1925 BEN HUR starring Ramon Novarro was selected as being culturally and historically most significant and THE GOLD RUSH also released in 1925 was considered to be Charlie Chaplin's most successful movie featuring the Little Tramp role so synonymous with many of his films.



*Wikipedia Public Domain photo*

By chance, while chatting with Jim Howson another neighbour, he also dropped a movie related story into my lap. Both he and Sharon Long are of the same generation and share a common connection with the old Lyceum theatre. Jim's parents emigrated from Scotland in 1952 and he spent his teenage years in the 1950s living in an apartment complex over the store fronts on the corner of Concession and Upper Wentworth, right next door to the Mountain Theatre. Since his mother worked at the theatre, Jim had the run of the place, not to mention lots of free movies. While exploring the theatre, he discovered that the basement was a treasure house of old movie posters and playbills dating back to the silent movies like "The Gold Rush" that Sharon's father, Peter McIsaac may have delivered to the Lyceum Theatre by bicycle using the incline in 1925.

*Mountain Memories by award winning writer Robert Williamson appears monthly for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society. See <[Hamiltonheritage.ca](http://Hamiltonheritage.ca)> for more information.*