IT IS A singular fact that eight years elapsed between the date on which the first moving pictures were shown and the opening of the world's first all-motion-picture theater in Pittsburgh. It took that long, mark you, for the germ of an idea to incubate in the minds of showmen steeped in the lore and traditions of the theater, alive to every opportunity for money-making and skilled beyond all others in the difficult art or science, whichever you choose to call it, of sensing the public's desire for entertainment.

I wonder if any of you realize that when the first all-moving-picture theater was opened in Pittsburgh the aeroplane was not much more than a dream of Darius Green, and it was three years later when the Wright brothers crashed the front pages of the newspapers of the world with the story of their first public flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Bleriot had not yet winged his way across the English Channel in that history-making twenty-seven minute flight from Calais to Dover. Automobiles were still curiosities on the highways, and were entered from the rear by a pair of steps with a brass handrail, like the thing with which some of us may be familiar as the reluctant threshold to the patrol

1 An address delivered at a luncheon meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on November 30, 1939. Ed.
wagon. And they were equipped, too, with whip-sockets so that when they failed to go, horses could be hitched to them, and the driver had to have a whip to make them pull him out of the mire of unpaved highways.

It was only the year before that Henry Ford contested the validity of the Sedden patents to a gas engine, and it was all of six years after the first moving picture theater opened that Mr. Ford in 1911 won the right to use these patents without interference.

And have you stopped to think that it was fifteen years after Pittsburgh gave the world its first exclusive theater of the movies that on November 2, 1920, the radio in Pittsburgh had its initial public use for broadcasting?

All this may seem too great a tax on your credulity if not on your memories but these are the unvarnished facts.

It was on June 19, 1905, that the world's first all-moving-picture theater was opened in the building at 433–435 Smithfield Street, second door from Diamond Street and now part of the Frank and Seder Store block.

This was the parent of all the movies of today, absolutely the first permanent bringing together of films in a separate building for show purposes in a theater in which there was no other kind of entertainment.

It was the idea of the late State Senator John P. Harris, who was then associated with his brother-in-law, Mr. Harry Davis, in a variety of amusement enterprises.

Mr. Harris and Mr. Davis had jointly shown "Lumiere's cinematograph" at the Avenue Theater in connection with a vaudeville and stock company continuous performance in April, 1897. These were the first movies ever seen in Pittsburgh. They consisted of a single reel used as an added attraction in the continuous show and introduced as a novelty, or rather as a freak of photography, by a lecturer.

As I have pointed out, eight years elapsed after this first showing of the flickering films in Pittsburgh before any man thought of or put into actual practice the idea of giving a show altogether of moving pictures. Mr. Harris was that man.

There was, of course, a good deal of talk among Mr. Harris and his
associates as to what the name of the newfangled show shop should be. There had been museums, musees, sideshows, vaudeville shows, variety theaters, and just plain playhouses, but there was no precedent for the silent entertainment obtained by means of moving photography. To me fell the task of coining a new name. My suggestion was that the price of admission and the old Greek word for theater—odeon—be combined to form a name, using the slang term nickel for five cents and odeon for theater. The combination Nickelodeon was so euphonious that in some quarters it has stuck to every kind of moving picture show even to this day.

The Nickelodeon was a remodeled storeroom, the remodeling consisting largely of the installation of a white linen sheet, some opera chairs, a crude phonograph, a lot of stucco, burlap and paint, and a myriad of incandescent lights. This re-converted storeroom under its slangy appellation—Nickelodeon—was a tremendous success from the very beginning. Its total capacity was ninety-six seats. Nevertheless it entertained the amazing average daily number of seven thousand patrons. Eight o’clock in the morning was the opening hour and it never ceased to grind out its films until midnight. In this run of sixteen hours there were seats for 6,144 people. The entire program consisted of one or two reels of film running for a period of from twelve to twenty minutes, and the audience, therefore, changed practically every quarter hour. There were no reserved seats and a nickel was the uniform price. In a day’s run fully one thousand people would stand.

There was some crowding, as you may imagine, and tender, sensitive corns and bunions were grievously offended.

I recall, with a never-ending laugh, an incident related by the Nickelodeon’s sole usher.

A barefoot newsboy had paid his nickel and pushed his way among the standees. Directly in front of him was a clergyman in Episcopal collar and frock. The dominie stepped back to rest a tired foot and in doing so planted his boot upon the newsie’s bare toes.

“Goshang you; why don’t you look where you’re steppin’,” the little street arab ejaculated vehemently as he raised his hurting foot to ease the pain with a squeeze of his hand.
“I’m sorry, lad,” the minister apologized, “but that was a naughty word you used. You must never use it again.”

And withdrawing a dime from his vest pocket, he added:

“Here’s a dime; I’ll give it to you if you promise never to say that bad word again.”

The boy reached for the dime and in turning about in the crowd to give it to him, the preacher moved forward a bit and planted his other foot on the toes of an Irish laborer standing by his side.

The Irishman grimaced and moaned painfully, and looking savagely at the embarrassed dominie, said:

“Oi have a word in my mouth that’s worth two dollars and a quarter.”

Then there is the story about the enterprising house manager at the Nickelodeon, who one day flashed a slide on the screen reading: “A twenty dollar bill has been found in the lobby. Will the owner please form a line at the box office window tomorrow night?”

Let’s take a look at what was going on in Pittsburgh theatricals when the Nickelodeon opened on June 19, 1905.

As a matter of fact only two theaters were open that week, the Nickelodeon and the Nixon, for it was the month of brides and roses, and until the following year no Pittsburgh theater ever ran through the summer months.

The Nixon was a comparatively new playhouse. It had opened on December 7, 1903, with Francis Wilson in “Erminie,” and on June 19, 1905, was playing a summer opera season of only a few weeks duration. The attraction was the W. T. Carleton Opera Company in “When Johnny Comes Marching Home.”

Every other theater was “dark,” as closing time is characterized in the argot of the play-world. But just a few days before in several instances and several weeks in others, the “S. R. O.” sign was being displayed at nearly all of them, for Pittsburgh was in those days “a good show town.”

The Duquesne Theater, on Penn Avenue, just a fortnight before, was presenting the Thalia Theater Yiddish Company in the “Kreutzer Sonata,” “The Truth,” and “Sappho.”

The Bijou — ah! the Bijou, home of the “mellerdrammer” — had
been playing "Bertha the Sewing Machine Girl," who hadn't lost a stitch. Its closing show, another classic familiar to the recent movies, was "The James Boys in Missouri."

Ben Greet and his Elizabethan Players were doing "Hamlet" at Carnegie Music Hall.

The Academy of Music had burlesque with Princess somebody doing a tease dance — "The Dance of the Asp" — just as teasing but a little more dressed up than Sally Rand in 1939.

Blaney's Empire Theater was on Collins Avenue, East End, afterwards called the Pershing, and doing such lacrimose shows as Bertha M. Clay's "Thorns and Orange Blossoms."

The Highland Theater, which few of you will remember, was at the bridge under which the Pennsylvania Railroad crosses Highland Avenue. The Yiddish Players from Irving Square Theater, New York, were playing a Jewish repertoire.

The Pittsburgh Exposition at the Point had an ice skating rink with hockey games as the chief attraction, and there was roller skating at the Auditorium on Penn Avenue.

The Alvin Theater had just closed with Olive May—John W. Albaugh, Jr., and their company in a sparkling comedy, "The Inspector from Kansas," and the Debovier Opera Company in the fourth act of Verdi's opera, "Otello."

The Grand, home of Keith Vaudeville, had closed for the summer with a fifteen-act bill that included the beloved Walter C. Kelly, the Virginia Judge, with his Old Dominion police court monologue, and the kinetograph, the American successor of Lumiere's cinematograph.

There were no air-conditioning systems in those days, and people found their entertainment in the pleasure parks, such as Kennywood, Southern Calhoun, Oakwood, and Luna. These were all running when the Nickelodeon made its maiden-bow, and each presented vaudeville, circus acts, and music.

The Nickelodeon flourished like the proverbial green bay tree or mushrooms in a dark cellar on a dank night. There is a tradition that the second all-moving-picture theater in the world was started at Warsaw, in downtrodden Poland, by an enterprising Pole who passed through
Pittsburgh at the time the first Nickelodeon was introduced and hurried home to his native land to forestall any competitor. This, however, is probably just a tradition.

Mr. Davis and Mr. Harris, quick to realize the importance of their new show business, immediately started other theaters in other cities. One of these was opened at Eighth and Market Streets, Philadelphia; another at Main and Water Streets, Rochester, New York; one at 1223 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia; another at Main and Division Streets, Buffalo; still another at 1205 Market Street, in the City of Brotherly Love, and yet another at Ninth and Market Streets, in that same Pennsylvania Quakertown; and one on Euclid Avenue in Cleveland.

In Pittsburgh fourteen or fifteen sprang up in the wake of the Nickelodeon. One was located at 639 Smithfield Street; another at Fifth Avenue and Grant Street, opposite the courthouse, and still others in other downtown sections. Oddly enough the idea of the neighborhood theater had not yet been evolved and no Nickelodeons were placed other than in crowded districts.

Just how realistic were the movies of those early days is illustrated by an incident that happened one night in the crowded Bijou Dream Theater at 639 Smithfield Street. A western drama was being shown on the screen, and the hero was in the toils of the villain who was just about to cut his heart out with a stiletto. The scene was tense. The audience was even tenser. Its emotions had been played upon throughout the reel. In the center of the house an Italian laborer had watched the plot weave itself up to the tragic moment. The Italian was breathless but still muttering monosyllabic imprecations upon the villain. Suddenly, as the stiletto was poised to strike, the Italian arose in his seat, drew a forty-five-caliber pistol from his hip pocket and fired point blank at the villain and through the screen.

Only the presence of a good house manager prevented a panic that night.

It was typical of all the Nickelodeons to have blaring phonographs over the box offices grinding out happy tunes in strident tones throughout the day and night.
One of these movies, as I have said, was at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Grant Street, directly across from the courthouse, where the judges were trying criminal cases and endeavoring to hear witnesses' testimony and counsels' arguments above the din of the Nickelodeon's phonograph.

The noise became so intolerable that in the interest of orderly justice the court issued an injunction against all picture houses, restraining them from using phonographs to attract patrons.

There has always been a great deal of curiosity as to what the first picture shown at the Nickelodeon was. A photograph of the building answers this question. There seems to have been a double bill on the opening day, for the one sheet cards outside announced "Poor but Honest," which was probably a serio-comic, and "The Baffled Burgler," which was likely a comedy. In front of the box office were the words "showing continuously." Next door to the theater was a penny arcade which advertised automatic vaudeville and admission free. This was at 431 Smithfield Street.

This amusement automat is often mistaken for the moving pictures of the screen and is responsible for many confused ideas as to just which was the first picture house and where was its location. The answer is not hard to find by an oldster with an uncanny memory and an intimate touch with the film industry.

In 1889 Thomas Edison invented the first motion picture camera. In the same year George Eastman perfected the first flexible film. Thus the wizard Edison was able to give eyes to his phonograph. The first machine was called the Edison Kinetoscope. It was a cabinet containing a wide slot through which one could see pictures of people and animals and scenes apparently in motion. There was a smaller slot into which one would drop a penny and start the kinetoscope going. It was used chiefly in open-front stores called "Penny Arcades" and may be regarded as the grandmother of the moving picture as we know it today. It was not, however, the original moving picture of the screen. In 1896 the Vitascope was invented, at about the same time that the French scientist, Lumiere, invented the Cinematograph.

Although the Vitascope was shown in New York in 1896, it was the
Cinematograph that gave the most perfect moving picture, and it was this device which first brought the films to Pittsburgh in 1897.

Twelve years of patent litigation followed and undoubtedly retarded the growth of this new infant industry which now ranks among the first five in America and represents an invested capital of more than two billion dollars.

Pittsburgh has another distinction in connection with the creation of the movies. It was a center of moving picture production before Hollywood was heard of, and was close on the heels of New York and New Jersey in the making of films.

A year after the Nickelodeon was opened Harry Davis entered the industry as a maker of his own moving pictures. Few people know that pictures ever were made here. Mr. Davis foresaw the tremendous demand for moving pictures and the inability of the then existing studios in New York and New Jersey to meet this demand. So he decided he would supply his own market with his own product. He employed two of Mr. Edison's finest experts, brought them to Pittsburgh and opened the first and I believe the only manufactory of moving pictures Pittsburgh has ever had. The studio was located in the Alsop Building, on Fifth Avenue next to the Park Building.

A bright young man from the New York picture studios was engaged as idea man at the munificent salary of forty dollars a week.

His name was Gilbert M. Anderson. Keep that name in mind for most of you were to know him later under another name.

Young Anderson was born to the show world. His sister was a great musical comedy star and his whole family was steeped in the sock and buskin.

He was to remain in Pittsburgh for a year and then to be “fired” for total lack of “ideas.” During these twelve months of his tenure in Pittsburgh, Gilbert M. Anderson filmed the ecclesiastical pageant on the occasion of the consecration of St. Paul's Cathedral on October 24, 1906, and created one of the first of the well-known “chase” type of film comedies that had a tremendous vogue in the early days of the “flickers” —a picture with its locale in Hazelwood and its plot evolving around a newspaper want ad in which everybody chased everybody else over all
sorts of hurdles, with a reversal of the film that made them run backwards and jump over walls and fences in reverse.

But Gilbert spent most of his time chasing Pittsburgh's beautiful daughters, and so Mr. Davis gave him a permanent leave of absence.

Sadly, Gilbert departed and next turned up in Indianapolis where he fell in with a motion picture machine inventor named Spohr. They formed the firm of Spohr and Anderson, abbreviated it to S. and A., and translated that into E-S-S-A-N-A-Y, which quickly became one of the leading motion picture studios in the world. One of their tremendously popular series was a westerner that told luridly of the adventures of Broncho Billy. That gentleman came to be the nation's idol among the men and women as well as the youngsters who had become bitten with the still new "bug" of movie attendance.

The hero, Broncho Billy, was our Gilbert M. Anderson himself, who played the part, made the films, and directed them. He had lost his forty-dollar-a-week job with Harry Davis because "he hadn't any ideas." He quickly became a millionaire showman and a figure in the new mart of the movies—Hollywood.

It was my great pleasure in 1929 to present to the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania the Lubin moving picture projecting machine that was first used in the first Nickelodeon.

The projecting machine which Mr. Davis and Mr. Harris had purchased for the opening of the Nickelodeon failed to arrive in time for the first show. George W. Dawson, now widely known as an expert moving picture cameraman, had been barnstorming around the country showing films in schoolhouses, colleges, vacant store rooms and other places along the main streets of small towns where the movies were as yet only hearsay.

Mr. Dawson loaned his Lubin projecting machine to the Nickelodeon, and it remained there until the regular machine was installed, which was about a week later.

This is the machine you now have in your museum. Speaking of this first projector, Mr. Dawson said:

"I changed the old carbon burner to a mazda light outfit. In those early days we had to use carbide tanks for producing light, instead of the
up-to-date rheostats and control coils you now have. We used water, loaded with salt, to control the current. There were no rewinds for rewinding the film. It was run into a bag hung in front of the machine. There were, as you noticed, no fire shutters or protection of any kind on the machine. I think this machine was about the first one used throughout this section of the country for putting on professional exhibitions. Our films, at that time, ranged from twenty-five to fifty feet, without titles. Among the early features were: 'The Bold Bank Robery,' 'The Moonshiner's Daughter,' 'Escaped from Sing Sing,' and a few others of that type. This about completes the history of this machine.'

News of the success of the Nickelodeon soon spread, and Nickelodeons sprang up all over the country. The copyists even then indicated their inclination toward the garish, which was later to result in palaces of oriental splendor by replacing the simple stucco front with papier-mache grottoes illuminated with red-eyed gargoyles.

This new group of inconspicuous theater operators sprang from queer origins. None of them had been previously connected with amusement enterprises. Most of them were Jews who had been engaged in mercantile pursuits. Here was a cash business that could be started with a few hundred dollars. Duplication was easy. With one ‘Nick’ established, others followed. In this modest way various circuits were started, in different parts of the country, which were sold to the bankers not many years later for millions.

Among the newcomers who began operations in New York were three unknowns who were later to become masters of a world industry. They were Adolph Zukor, Marcus Loew, and William Fox.

Zukor, just out of the fur business, had a penny arcade on Fourteenth Street. He cleared part of the arcade and opened a Nickelodeon, beginning the foundation of a fortune for which he later refused forty million dollars. Loew, also graduated from the fur business, opened a store on Fourteenth Street which was the beginning of the Loew Circuit and also a fortune of gigantic proportions. Fox, formerly in the cloth-finishing business, opened a store in Brooklyn, quickly followed by others and he, too, was on his way to millions. It was a coincidence that Zukor and Fox
were born in adjacent villages in Hungary and spent their youth in surroundings where money was unknown.

Picture-producing companies began operations in various lofts and unused crannies, and the most unexpected people found themselves engaged in the excitements of creative and lucrative art. There were Biograph, Vitagraph, Lubin, Essanay, and others meteorically prominent, now long forgotten.

The chief producer of the Biograph Company was an inconspicuous actor named D. W. Griffith. He was the first to sense the possibilities of the new medium and the first to realize the value of picture personalities. In a brief time he gathered about him the people who were to rule the screen in their day: Mary Pickford, Lillian Gish, Dorothy Gish, Mae Marsh, Robert Barron, Blanche Sweet, Lionel Barrymore, Henry Walthall, and others.

Soon came a director with the ideal low-comedy sense, Mack Sennett. If anyone can claim to have rolled audiences in the aisles it is Sennett. His Keystone pictures were completely uninhibited. He knew no restraint. To him a laugh was a laugh, no matter how far he had to go to get it. If a taxicab with policemen rolled up, forty policemen emerged. His chases went through judges' chambers, the mayor's office, his wife's bathroom, the governor's love nest, or wherever they could be most embarrassing. After these arduous and overheating pursuits, Sennett refreshed his actors by having them chase each other into a pond or into the waiting arms of the "Keystone Cops" of happy memory. Among his early standbys were Charlie Chaplin, Fatty Arbuckle, and Mabel Normand.

I hope you will pardon me if I seem to have wondered away from my text, but the story of the first Nickelodeon is so intimately interlaced with the evolution of a great industry that I would feel I had scarce completed my narrative if I were to fail to give you a few illuminating figures.

This two to three billion dollar industry today entertains weekly 150,000,000 people in the United States; in the whole world half a billion; spends on an average $375,000 to make a single feature and as
much, in extraordinary cases, as $750,000. It spends a hundred million annually for advertising, and has taken in in a single theater the world’s gross for a single week of nearly $200,000.

So, from the little acorn on Smithfield Street in 1905, has grown the giant oak of today, symbolized by an industry about which we may now talk in the language of the New Deal and Col. Mulberry Sellers—“There’s billions in it!”