

GONE ARE THE DAYS By Robert Williamson

Living today in a pandemic world of isolation as we are these days, have you ever wondered what people did for entertainment over a century ago before motion pictures, radio or television?

To begin with, statistics tell us that 73,000 patrons ascended the Wentworth East End Incline each summer season to attend plays performed in George Summers 700 seat open air theatre situated on the edge of the escarpment. To attract such large seasonal audiences in a city of only 50,000 people, the stock company had to perform a new play every week for an 18 weeks nightly performance. Sadly there is no film or audio record of any of the 200 plays performed. The best we can offer now is the following sample of newspaper reviews of some performances from the 1910 era.

In *The Gold Mine*, George Summers is at his best ensuring a good night's enjoyment. His performances are so popular that streetcar specials were laid on every five minutes from King and James to handle the crowds. His comedic ability in the farce, *The Wrong Mr. Wright*, prevents even the performers from keeping a straight face and George Summers' presentation of *Charley's Aunt* was so funny that audiences were tired from laughing. *The Lion and the Mouse* drew large crowds to watch Mr. Summers play a wealthy man who manipulates everything to his purpose while Mrs. Summers is at her best in an emotional role. For a good evening you can't do better than go to the mountain theatre this week. George and Belle Summers were presented with gifts after their performance in *Rip Van Winkle* for their 700th stage appearance in Hamilton. Mr. Summers' portrayal of a colonial Dutch American who falls asleep for twenty years was a very popular role. He has a genius for character creation and comedic accents in broken English.



Advertising of a Summers play by a horse drawn wagon during the summer of 1907 courtesy of Kompass Collection HPLSC.

A billboard wagon waiting at the upper terminal of the Wentworth Incline Railway in 1907 speaks volumes about entertainment in Hamilton a century ago. Street advertising offering a variety of New York plays like the murder mystery entitled "*The Wife*" was essential for George Summers to stay ahead of the competition. Fortunately the Wentworth Streetcar line had just been extended to the (Wentworth) East End Incline.

In 1907 Mountain View Park (now Southam Park) also located on an incline railway, had a grand opening of its new roller skating rink in a covered pavilion with the largest pipe organ in Canada. A first class band provided music for dancing. There were good vaudeville acts, a merry-go-round, marionettes and even high wire acts.

More competition was provided at this time with the grand opening of the Bennett Theatre beside the terminal of the Interurban Electric Railway (known today as LRT) at the corner of Main and John Streets. It was Hamilton's most elegant theatre with a seating capacity of 1,684.

In 1909 the Maple Leaf Amusement Park opened beside the Jockey Club and race track at the corner of Ottawa and Barton Streets. It attracted 20,000 people on opening day. There was a theatre that introduced a new phenomena called the Edison Kinetograph silent motion picture show between vaudeville acts. Nearby was a fairground for Buffalo Bill Wild West Shows. The summer was certainly full of entertainment in the "Good Old Days".

As if preparing his own epitaph, George Summers wrote in a Toronto newspaper before he died: *"How fleeting are the achievements of a stage actor, no matter how great his accomplishments. The author leaves behind his books, the composer his music, the scientist his revelations, the artist his paintings, the sculptor his marbles - all to endure until the end of time. But the stage actor leaves nothing but the memory that does not extend beyond his generation."*

Those days are gone forever. How priceless would it have been to save a record of it on film or photographs. However, you can still obtain an out of print copy of the photo filled Summers Family Biography by calling this writer at (905) 383-6084.

Mountain Memories by award winning writer Robert Williamson appears monthly for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society. See <Hamiltonheritage.ca> for meeting information.