

PICTURES PAST

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Before there was HD ...

Before there was television ...

Before there were talkies ...

Before there were silent films ...

Before all that, there was the **Magic Lantern**.

With its brilliant but volatile light, the **lantern** would fill a screen with exquisite images that had been hand-painted on round glass discs akin to slides - slides that provided the bones for an unfolding story fleshed out on the voice of a narrator and brought to life with the spirited help of a piano and voice.

"This is what you would have seen in Springfield 100 years ago," said Terry Borton of the American **Magic-Lantern** Theater.

And this is what all can see for free at 7 p.m. Thursday at Heritage Center of Clark County.

The show appears in conjunction with an award-winning Heritage Center exhibit about how technology has changed everyday life, including the way we get our entertainment. And like a candle inside a jack-o-**lantern**, Borton's Halloween-themed show throws light on the modern **magic lanterns** that continue to entertain us today.

Too hot to handle

The show's driving device was the **lantern** itself - often a handsome brass and mahogany contraption of some bulk that was the forerunner of the slide and movie projector.

"It generally is a box, for lack of a better word, commonly known as a lamphouse, in which is some form of light," explained Jack Judson, owner of the **Magic Lantern** Castle Museum of San Antonio and a collector of **Magic Lantern** material.

The light source during the Gay Nineties was limelight, a mixture of hydrogen and oxygen that "impinges a very hot flame on a cylinder of calcium oxide, otherwise known as lime," Judson said.

Because the reaction was "similar to what happened at the Challenger disaster," he added, the light source led to "some very unhappy audiences."

Soon, alternate sources of light were found: gas light, oil lamps and later electric bulbs.

A Pixar preview

The lights and **lantern** were essentially tech support for the artistic part of the venture: the glass slides.

Borton, who has the only touring **Magic Lantern** show in the country, is an expert on the foremost artist of **lantern** slides, Joseph Boggs Beale of the C.W. Briggs Co. of Philadelphia. (See related story at right.)

"He was like one of the artists in the Disney studio," said Borton, a Ph.D. in education and former editor of The Weekly Reader who recently finished a scholarly book on the artist.

"Beale's slides were really fabulous," Borton said.

Beale's ravens, which appear in the Halloween show, "are just absolutely spectacular," Borton said.

They have both "extraordinary detail" and manage to create an illusion of movement.

The big picture

Coupled with the exciting technology, the artistry attracted extraordinary audiences in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

"This was a big industry," Borton said. "There were something like 100,000 shows a year. The whole market was so big, we figure a million people a year saw this kind of show."

The shows were produced, then sold to about 70 distributors, who then sent them out to **Magic Lantern** projectionists all around the country, a country with decidedly Victorian tastes in content.

"The most common shows were travelogs and science and art, kind of the equivalent of the Discovery Channel and PBS," Borton said. "They called it moral entertainment."

During the day Thursday, Borton will bring that form of show - one describing 400 years of American history - to Clark County students at the Kuss Auditorium.

Borton said only about 10 percent of the **Magic Lantern** shows were created primarily for entertainment.

But even the entertainment-based Halloween show combines highbrow with lowbrow, he said.

The raven slide, for instance, is connected with the Halloween show's rendering of the classic Edgar Allan Poe poem of the same name.

The same show combines that does of Poe with what Borton calls "one of the more famous and controversial slides of the 19th century," the Rat Catcher.

This sequence shows a man snoring with his mouth wide open and a rat at first creeping toward the opening and then - with the encouragement of an audience egged on by the narrator - hurtling toward his gaping gullet.

Many shows of the late 19th century were "a sort of odd combination of Shakespeare and melodrama," Borton said, and the melodrama of early silent movies "is coming directly out of this tradition."

Land of enchantment

The **Magic Lantern** program calls for "a very flamboyant (performance) style," said Borton, whose voice plunges in and out of character in the course of an interview.

He and singer Nancy Stewart encourage audiences snore along with characters, to sing songs and to do other things that are second nature to fans of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show."

Fourth generation "lanternist," Borton is the first in his family to make a living at it, and museum owner Judson said the performances are to die for.

"You'd better go see Terry, because you'll be enchanted," he said.

That's just what you'd expect in presence of **Magic Lantern**.