It is a sad thing when precious items become lost or mislaid and even more so when they have been created by a talent whose like we may never see again.

Magic Lantern Mystery

Recently I acquired a 100-year old Magic Lantern, the forerunner of today's sophisticated slide projector. While mine is now a piece of memorabilia, in those far-off days slide shows were probably most common from about 1880 on, reaching their peak in the late 1890s, and continuing well into this century. Indeed, many local lantern slide shows were still being given up to World War I. However, as first movies became popular in the 1920s, and then talkies just before 1930, the lantern show fell into disuse.

But even when colour film became available for still photography, and colour films such as Dufaycolor and Agfacrome and Kodachrome became available in 1938, their relative cost counted against them somewhat. Most photographers then held on to their lantern slides until after the war. Many photographers had collected lantern slides, either as a hobby or for their interest in photography. Some even gave slide shows as a way of making a living.

In an electronic age it would be easy to dismiss experiences such as a lantern slide show and prejudge it as being boring. Not so. In fact, one of the most memorable and stimulating events in my lifetime was seeing Rosalind Mainfort's floral exhibits at the Assembly Hall, Margaret Street, Sydney in the late 1940s. Miss Mainfort, then President of the Royal Photographic Society brought to Australia her collection of colour lantern slides. These were projected with a large format projector to give a screen image some 20 feet wide. The quality was simply astounding.

In the same vein, another lantern slide show shortly afterwards was one tinged with much pride and pathos. It was the testimonial and tribute to Harold Cazneaux shortly before he died. Caz, as he was affectionately known, was then 74 years of age and had a distinguished career as both a professional and exhibition photographer. The special tribute on October 27, 1952, was highlighted by a screening of a wide selection of Caz's best works made into lantern slides and toned to match his sepia and bromide prints. All of Sydney's notables as well as representatives of every camera club in Australia were present at this warm and well-attended gathering.

The evening's programme was called simply 'Milestones' and attended by a tape interview and comments by some of Sydney's leading exhibition photographers, including some written comments by the great photographer himself.

When Caz died on June 19 the following year, Jack Cato (the famous Victorian photographer and historian) wrote in the Melbourne Age that this selection of 50 lantern slides and the actual voice recording were now even more valuable since the man himself was no longer available to consult about Australia's early days in photography.

Ironically, news of Caz's death reached members of the Northern Tasmanian Camera Club on the very evening they were seeing 'Milestones'. The tape-synchronised tribute was being shown in various Australian centres. From Sydney it had travelled to Melbourne, where it was shown in late January 1953, and subsequently to northern Tasmania. The then President of the NTCC, John Ikin, wrote a letter of commendation to Kaast Burke, at that time editor of Australian Photo-Review, who was instrumental in arranging for the nation's tribute to Caz. Ikin wrote: 'I trust that his (Caz's) work and his voice will now be placed in safe keeping in the archives of Australian photography.'

As a historian of Australian Photography, I have a strong commitment to keeping track of discoveries of early workers and their pictures and none less so than trying to locate Caz's lost works. At one time I thought we were onto the missing lantern plates when a message was received from a Mrs Springfield of Nisson Bay to the effect that her family had found a wooden box of 'old pictures' under the house in which she had been living in the Balmain area. But all attempts to trace Mrs Springfield drew a blank because our informant had received only a garbled account over the phone and failed to ask for the caller's current address or phone number.

I know that reminiscing about lantern slides may have to do with present day photography but the early photographic pioneers laid the foundation of today's camera clubs and established the various photographic journals that keep us informed of new developments in our craft.

Anyone having any knowledge of the Cazneaux family or slides is invited to contact the author care of Australian Photography magazine, GPO Box 606, Sydney, NSW 2001.

by Max Wilson