

The Greek Diaspora and Early American Cinema

By Steve Frangos

Special to The National Herald

No one denies the direct involvement of Greeks in the very establishment of the American film industry. As technicians, promoters, actors and even scriptwriters, Greeks are a recorded presence at not only the inception of this new media, but also during its initial dispersal across the planet. Since this is the case, writing detailed accounts of the roles, influences and so documented contributions of Greeks to, what was to quickly become, American cinema should be effortless. This is far from the case.

While documentation from

1889 to 1922 clearly places an array of Greek immigrants in North America, England and France at the very forefront of the American film industry, the data is scattered and surprisingly disparaging or dismissive of these Greeks.

Greek Americans still speak with pride of the considerable successes of movie theatre owners Alexander Pantages and the Skouras brothers, George, Charles and Spyros. Regional chains of Greek family-owned movie businesses such as the Kerasotes chain provide ample evidence for the viability of that industry in our community to this very day.

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Compounding these recollections and continuing family businesses is that cities across the nation have converted many movie palaces, first built and owned by Greek immigrants, into downtown civic centers. While the Pantages RKO Theatre in Los Angeles is perhaps the best known, the Diamos (Diamantatsikos) family's Fox Theater in Tucson, Arizona is another carefully restored building of great local civic pride and identification. The Diamos family movie theatre business once included movie theaters throughout Arizona (Tucson, Douglas, Bisbee, Nogales, Phoenix and Tombstone), as well as many in northern Mexico. The Diamos chain of theaters began in 1912 with a single nickelodeon in Tucson.

It is well recalled within the Greek American community that many of the early immigrants owned movie theatre chains based on earlier successes as vaudeville houses and even nickelodeon emporiums. Yet it is at this stage that we move from lengthy, documented accounts into the realm of fragmented sources and dimly recalled family stories. Part of the lapse in community recollection is the time period we are speaking of: the mid-1890's. Another is during the dynamic transformations in film viewing-technology, which was as dazzling as any we encounter today in the Digital Age.

The first commercially success-



Thomas Edison, right, demonstrates the kinetograph, the first motion picture camera, along with fellow inventor George Eastman, who helped develop the first film, during a 1928 party endorsing the camera shown above, which is not of Edison's making. The two scientists made their inventions before this picture was taken.

whelming enthusiasm was such that "kinescope parlors sprang up in all major cities worldwide, and the demands for new titles seemed insatiable (www.kodak.com)."

By 1908, there were approximately 8,000 kinescope parlors in the United States, by then dubbed "nickelodeons," with another 2,000 by 1910. It is popularly understood that these kinescope parlors received their new name from the merger of the "nickel" it cost to view each film, and the Greek word "odeon" for theater. These primitive storefront operations received more than 25 million viewers a week, mostly working class immigrants, for whom these parlors presented no linguistic, cultural, or social barriers. These "peepshow" emporiums were the first commercially successful film theaters in history.

AMONG THE FIRST

Greek businessmen were liter-

purchased six kinescopes from Edison's agents, the Holland Brothers in New York City. Georgiades and (whose name is spelled "Tragidis in some contemporary documents, and in the 1895 London Directory, but which appears variously in the literature as Tragedis, Trajedis or Tragedes," and which also accounts for some of the confusion about these men's actions) immediately took these machines to London.

Another Greek, whose name appears in early Edison business records spelled as both "Mavro" and "Maurou," also purchased kinescopes from the Holland Brothers. Yet aside from his name (and that he was a Greek), the early business records reveal nothing else concerning this early entrepreneur.



A man watching a film from a peephole machine in this early 20th Century illustration.

ful film-viewing device, the kinetoscope was an invention of Thomas Edison (1847-1931) and W.K.L. Dickson (1860-1931), perfected in West Orange, New Jersey in 1891. Edison baptized this new invention the kinetoscope from "kineto" and "scopos," Classical Greek for "movement" and "to watch."

A kinetoscope was a finely crafted upright wooden cabinet measuring 18 inches (W) x 27 inches (L) x 4 feet (H). You bent over the cabinet; looked into a viewing eyepiece, which featured a magnifying lens on top; and watched a short film.

These machines featured a coin-operated format, so anyone could step up, drop a nickel into the slot, and see a film. The first films were incredibly short, between 30 to 60 seconds apiece. Films, termed "actualities" at this time, such as *Boxing Cats*, *A Shoeblack at Work*, *Record of a Sneeze*, *Carmencita*, *Bar Room*, *Wrestling Match*, *Barber Shop*, *Annabelle Butterfly Dance* and others became international sensations.

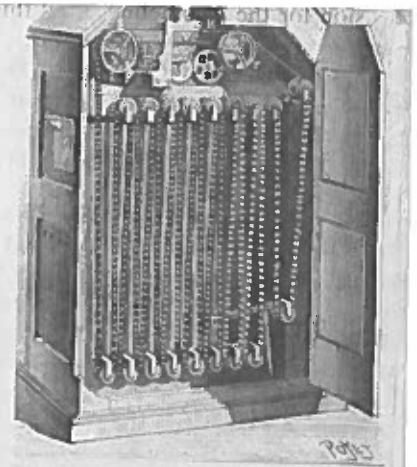
From our perspective in time, it may be difficult to understand the thunderous public reaction to this new visual medium. The over-

ally among the very first to open kinetoscope parlors in North America and Europe. For the moment, we know more about the documented roles of Greek businessmen in Europe than we do for those in North America.

The pace of events in 1894-95 occurred so quickly, and sources contradict each other so often, that it is difficult to reconstruct the exact sequence of events. In citing the lightening-quick sequence of events below, it will become immediately obvious that they match or surpass anything in our computerized age.

The first kinetoscopes were ready for shipping on April 6, 1894. Ten were sent to the Holland Brothers, Andrew and George, in New York City. On Saturday, April 14, 1894, the first "Kinetoscope Parlor," owned by the self-same Holland Brothers, opened at 1155 Broadway. "Five machines were placed in a row, and a customer could view the films in each for a total of 25 cents." Edison was selling the kinetoscopes for \$250 a piece. Individual films ran around \$30. By February 1895, sales totaled almost \$150,000. By March 1895, Edison profits from the sale of kinetoscopes alone totaled \$75,000.

At a time, only noted as "Spring 1894" in the available documentation, George Georgiades (Demetrios Anastas Georgiades) and his partner George Tragides



An illustration of a kinetoscope, so baptized by its inventor, Thomas Edison, who used the Greek words for "movement" and "watch."

Accepted cinema history now asserts that the first kinetoscope parlor in London opened on October 7, 1894 at 70 Oxford Street, operated by two Americans, Franck Zeveley Maguire and Joseph Baucus. Some sources note that, in Paris in April 1894, "Edison's agents, the Werner Brothers, had also... run into the wildcat Georgiades operation, advertising that 'our firm is the only one in France which sells the authentic apparatus made by M. Edison' (www.victorian-cinema.net)." Yet no one ever explains why Georgiades, who purchased his machines from Thomas Edison's New

immigrating to the United States,

netoscopes and Early American Cinema

York City agents (the Holland Brothers) should be a "wildcat."

Other sources claim that George Georgiades gave a much-publicized exhibition of the kinetoscope in France. In July of 1894, Georgiades invited Henri Flamans, the editor of *Le Magasin Pittoresque*, to view a kinetoscope. Some good questions to ask here is, if Georgiades was showing the kinetoscope in Paris in April and/or also July, how did Maguire and Baucus manage to beat the two Greek entrepreneurs to a first kinetoscope showing in London? Why would impresarios of Georgiades and Tragedis obvious flare, influential and charismatic as they may have been, exhibit a kinetoscope to one individual in France while missing the same chance to do so in London, where by all accounts they were based? Also, why did Georgiades just exhibit the kinetoscope to Flamans without an audience to add to the impression he so obviously wanted to make on a notable member of the press?

The mystery deepens once we learn that, in early 1894, Georgiades and Tragides immediately established kinetoscope parlors throughout London in prominent locations such as The Strand and Old Broad Street. These new storefront theaters constituted the Greek showmen's "American Kinetoscope Company with offices at 95 Queen Street, London and 20 Boulevard Montmartre, Paris (www.victorian-cinema.net)."

Wishing to expand their business, the two Greeks balked at the high cost of \$250 per Edison kinetoscope, as well as at the time delay involved with production and shipping.

Georgiades and Tragides wanted a local and, frankly, cheaper source for kinetoscopes. But how to get such a "high-tech" mechanism constructed? As fate would have it, by total happenstance. Here is how Terry Ramsaye, the noted film historian, reports on the odd sequence of events:

"Georgiades and Trajedis fancied a certain brand of Turkish cigarettes, which made them familiar in the cigarette establishment of John Melachrino... To their countryman, Melachrino, the

sending him, and anyone else with one of his machines, any new films. As one might suspect, at this moment in history, the Edison Company was the only manufacturer of films. The Edison films, unlike the machines they played on, were all copyrighted. What to do?

Once again Georgiades and Tragides alter the history of world cinema when they "suggested that Paul make some new films for their kinetoscope exhibitions (www.victorian-cinema.net)."

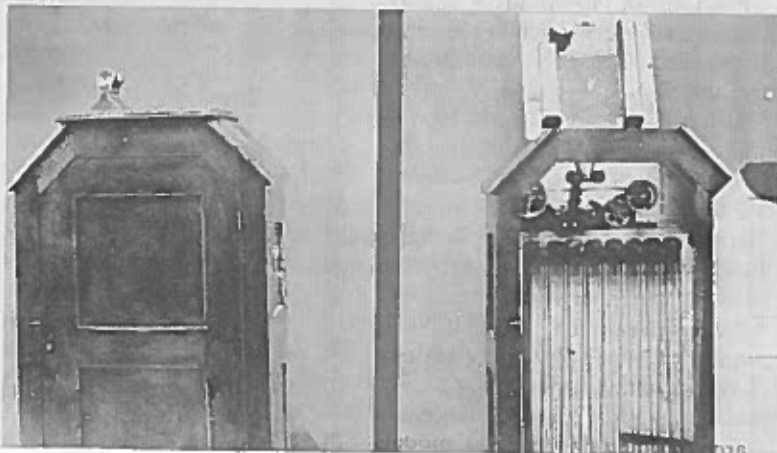
That Robert Paul's new films were initially prompted and partially financed by sales to these two Greeks is most often ignored. On March 29, 1895, the first successfully made English film, "Incident

solitary viewing. By February 1895, two French inventors, Louis and Auguste Lumiere, were given a patent for their cinematographe, which projected a 35mm film image onto a large screen. On December 28, 1895 in Paris, the Lumiere brothers showed a series of short films. The flash in the pan for kinetoscopes had flashed. The time for motion pictures displayed in theaters had arrived.

Kinetoscopes did not disappear entirely from the world of popular entertainment, but they were now relegated to amusement parks, penny arcades, and even carnivals. While "entrepreneurial showmen seized on the moving picture novelty... many expected (the new



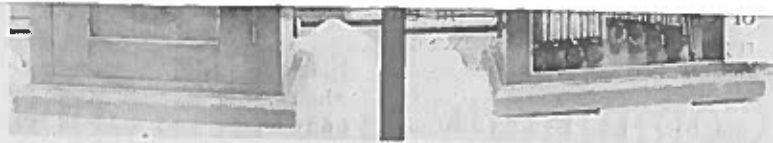
A kinetoscope parlor, the world's earliest version of a film theater, in 1899 San Francisco. Greeks were among the first businessmen to open such parlors in North America and Europe.



Greeks confided their quest... Melachrino, in turn, recalled an English customer, Henry Short. Now Short had gossiped over the counter of the skill of his friend Robert W. Paul, maker of scientific instruments of precision. At Melachrino's, the Greek's waited for Short (who) took them to Paul with their mechanical problem. Georgiades and Tragidis asked Paul to duplicate the kinetoscope. He reflected and demurred, pointing out that it was undoubtedly patented by Edison, and that it would be illegal to build it."

Robert Paul (1869-1943) was amazed to discover that Edison never patented the kinetoscope outside the United States and, after sustained pressure by Tragides began to produce his own machines. Paul built the six new kinetoscopes ordered by the two Greek businessmen as well as 60 more. The London inventor sold a number of these new "kinetoscopes," as well as using them to establish his own storefront parlors. "By November 1894, the two Greeks had evidently mixed their genuine machines with Paul's copies, since Edison's legitimate agents, Maguire and Baucus, cabled Edison, seeking his name in a suit against parties using 'one genuine with four spurious machines (www.victorian-cinema.net)."

Once Paul's production of a kinetoscope knock-off was discovered, Edison's agents stopped



Two "peephole" machines, showing the continuous, circulating loop of film. These primitive cameras were featured in nickelodeons where, in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, millions of people watched films every week by inserting a nickel into the machine.

Outside Clovelly Cottage," which shows Henry Short (remember him?) outside of Birt Acres (the camera man's) home, was produced.

From this point onwards, we hear no more on the life or business career of good George Tragides. The intrepid Georgiades does not fade from the historical stage just yet, however. It is well recorded that Georgiades hosted a kinetoscope exhibition at the Tabacaria Neves in Lisbon on March 6, 1895. Georgiades' exhibition is fully acknowledged as "the machine's first showing in Portugal," and thus the first time American films were displayed in that country.

The main fault of the kinetoscope was it was only suitable for

kinetoscope movie craze) to last only a few weeks (www.victorian-cinema.net)." Instead, this medium led to the first motion pictures.

The direct involvement of Greek Americans in nickelodeons is widely recalled within the community. Many Greek motion picture theater families freely attest to their beginnings in nickelodeons. But such references are always mentioned in passing, never discussed at great length or depth. We must do more to preserve the direct involvement of our Greek immigrant forbearers in the very creation of the American Film Industry.

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