

# History of the Semaphore Library



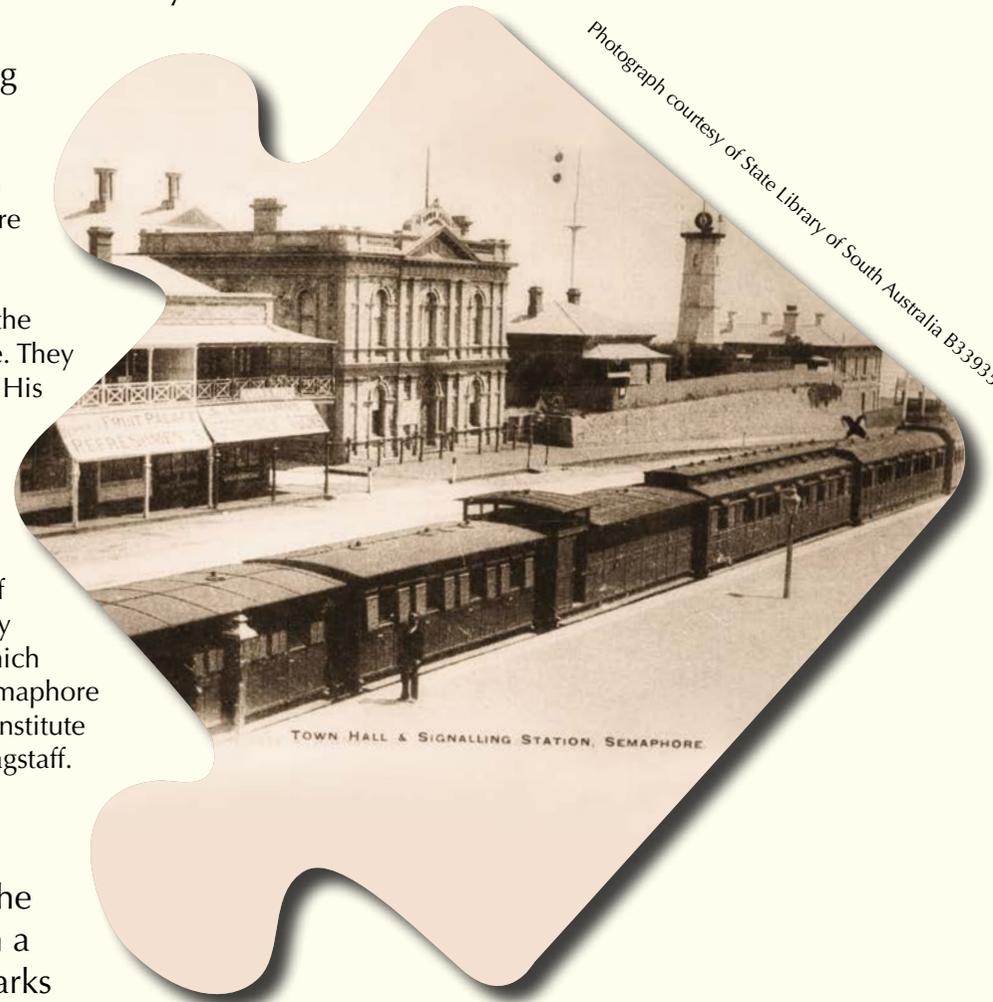
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## The Semaphore Library

### Official Opening

On 15 March 1884 his Excellency Governor Robinson arrived at Semaphore accompanied by his daughter, Miss Robinson, to open the Semaphore Institute. They were welcomed by His Worship the Mayor of Semaphore, Mr. Theodore Hack, J.P. His Excellency was honoured with a viceregal salute of guns by D Company and gay bunting which streamed across Semaphore Road between the Institute and the Customs flagstaff.

On opening the Institute the Governor said the opening of such a fine building marks in a special way the progress of the town. <sup>1</sup>



Photograph courtesy of State Library of South Australia B33935

The Institute came about by the patient toil of a hardworking committee led by Chairman Mr. Nathaniel Oldham and Mr. J. C. Lovely, J. P., Chairman of the Lefevre Peninsula District Council. The building was designed by architects Wright and Reed in a Victorian/Classical style, "reflecting the wealth and progress of Semaphore as a popular beach resort".<sup>1</sup> Messrs. Williams & Cleave were contracted to erect the building of stone, with an iron roof.

In 1884 the main hall was 70ft long x 47ft wide, and 34ft high, with a stage arranged for theatrical performances. Attached to the stage were performers' retiring rooms. In the front of the hall was a library, reading-room, retiring and cloak rooms, a spacious entrance hall and stairs to the first floor. On the first floor were Corporation offices and a gallery. The building had a 56ft frontage and was 148ft long.

"The interior of the Institute was plainly but well finished, with the library, reading room and hall all having cornices. The ventilation of the rooms was ample, and in addition to ordinary entrances, two side escape doors were provided... The hall was lighted by Young & Smith's patent 'crown shadowless sunlights' an entirely new invention, by which either the inner or outer circle of lights could be turned on or off independently".<sup>1</sup>

The Governor stated "I have been told since entering here, that ten years ago Semaphore consisted of sand hills on the seacoast with one or two families living here, and now you have a fine rising town with a population of around 5,000 people. I may heartily congratulate you on your prosperity... I venture to say the money is well spent, because Institutes are educational in character... where people can meet for the purposes of recreation, instruction and general entertainment... the advantages of education were obvious, but amusements were also important... the nature of the entertainment in which people participated, and the manner in which entertainment was conducted, was of the greatest consequence to the community. They could listen to historical, scientific, or other lectures, to the sweet sounds of music, or see representations on the stage".<sup>1</sup>



During the years that followed many groups utilised the Semaphore Institute including the Semaphore Chess and Draughts Club which began meeting in April 1884, Miss Carry Nelson's Operetta Company who organised the children of the Lefevre Peninsula to perform 'The Gypsies', and the Port Adelaide Orpheus Society who conducted smoke concerts.

In 1895 the Institute was used as temporary accommodation for male immigrants who arrived on the Embleton from Buenos Aires. They were cared for under the supervision of Rev. F. W. Wilkinson, of Alberton, and the Mayor of Semaphore.<sup>2</sup>

The Semaphore Tennis club held its annual sea side dance in the Institute. In 1910, under the direction of Mrs Bollen the hall was "transformed into a flowery bower... with ropes of fern asparagus, studded with scarlet poppies and geraniums suspended from a big floral umbrella hanging from the central gasoliers... The stage was turned into a conservatory, with handsome pot-plants, and trailers of feathery green, brightened with snatches of scarlet blossoms. Five big diamond shaped mirrors, framed in crimson poppies, were arranged to reflect the pretty frocks and twinkling feet of the dancers. Crossed tennis racquets and croquet mallets, emblems of the sport, also adorned the stage".<sup>3</sup>

In 1918 the American School of Dress-cutting advertised dressmaking classes in the Institute stating "A well-dressed woman commands respect, attention, and admiration wherever she goes. And be your income ever so modest you may dress well and have smart, well-fitting frocks if you know how to cut them properly".<sup>4</sup>

The First Semaphore Boy Scout Troop held meetings in the old gymnasium shed on the western side of the Institute. In 1928, when the gymnasium was sold to the Methodist Church the group met in the basement of the Institute under the stage. Their space consisted of a large hall with a servery at the western end. The Semaphore troop consisted of three patrols known as the Kangaroos, Magpies and Ravens. Jack Purches, a member of the Ravens, remembers when Audrey Hall ran his dancing classes. After troop meetings the scouts would take turns looking at the dancers upstairs, from the basement.<sup>5</sup>

The building was used by various picture show proprietors. Miragraph Pictures showed Peoples Pictures Company movies every Wednesday evening and Saturday afternoon in October 1910. Semaphore Wondergraph Pictures used the Institute to screen matinees, while its evening programme was screened in the Open Air Picture Drome.<sup>6</sup>

In 1911 Hugh Waterman a bookseller and stationer of Semaphore Road founded Ozone Amusements. Ozone Amusements built the first purpose built indoor picture theatre in Port Adelaide in 1913 and began screening films in the Semaphore Institute twice a week from December 1918.<sup>6</sup>

In 1929 Ozone Amusements funded the refurbishment and conversion of the Hall into a cinema which it then rented from Port Adelaide Council. Architect Chris A. Smith engaged builders Silver and Ollrich. The conversion created an auditorium with 424 Dress circle seats, 36 side box seats, 616 Stalls and 55 sets of seat chairs each providing an admirable view of the stage.<sup>6</sup>

# Official Opening Semaphore Ozone Theatre

The Mayor of Port Adelaide, Arthur Lewis officially opened the Semaphore Ozone Theatre on 9 December 1929 stating, "Semaphore is to have one of the most up to date Talkie theatres in the Commonwealth which occupies an admirable position at Semaphore immediately facing the local railway station, fronting the tramline and being within a stone's throw from the jetty".

The Theatre has a highly decorated Proscenium and stage which is large enough to accommodate any dramatic or operatic show as well as dressing rooms and all the conveniences of a modern cinema. The Talkies have been installed by the Radio Corporation of America.<sup>7</sup>

The cinema proved to be a popular venue with many customers holding permanently booked seats.

"A beautiful new picture theatre, richly furnished with many beautiful tapestries on the walls and a myriad of coloured lights which play when the ordinary lights are out, make an enchanted fairy land of the theatre".<sup>8</sup>

Arizona, was the film chosen for the opening night. "Warner Baxter as the devil may care Cisco Kid played the finest role of his career, his voice low and melodious, with just a touch of Spanish accent was extremely pleasing to the ear. Edmond Lowe, as Sergeant Mickey Dunn the sworn enemy of the Cisco Kid, introduced many delightful comedy scenes into his part".<sup>9</sup>

During the 1940s the Semaphore Ozone was flooded with tourists from the Largs North camping facility which housed Broken Hill miners and their families who came to Adelaide on Company arranged summer holidays.

Hoyts Theatres Ltd acquired the Semaphore Ozone along with most of the Ozone Amusements formerly owned by Waterman Bros in 1951. In 1952 they refurbished the Semaphore Ozone to very a grand design.<sup>6</sup>



# Official Opening Hoyts Ozone Theatre

The gala opening of the new Hoyts Ozone Theatre took place on 20 November 1952. Net proceeds of the evening were donated to the Le Fevre Community Hospital.<sup>10</sup>

The theatre was completely renovated. "Instead of the sloping floor in the foyer, patrons ascended to the main hall by terraces on floors covered by thick new carpet with an underlay of granulated rubber...Antique chandeliers gave a subdued yet clear light... The smoke lounge provided a cosy, homely atmosphere, with comfortable arm chairs, and an electric fire to provide warmth on cold occasions... The wood panelling surrounding the lounge was very rich in appearance."<sup>6</sup>

"New comfortable seating with arm rests was provided throughout. In the new seating arrangements space was sacrificed for additional comfort". The window coverings, proscenium and ceiling were all decorated beautifully with gold leaf used instead of paint providing a much better effect. The latest type of heating appliances and air circulators were installed for comfort and a Westrex Sound System was installed to provide the clearest result. The screen itself was all plastic, the first of its kind in this state. Rich red Genoa velvet draw curtains were complimented by 24 inch gold fringed drapes with gold tassels. Hoyts Ozone Theatres were commended on the transformation. The second opening featured Robert Taylor and Elizabeth Taylor in Ivanhoe plus specially selected featurettes.<sup>6</sup>

In 1955 Cinemascope was installed resulting in the loss of 128 stall seats and 34 dress circle seats. The first Cinemascope film was Three Coins in the Fountain.

The introduction of television in May 1959 saw a decline in cinema attendances. The Port Adelaide Odeon closed 14 May 1960 and the Semaphore Ozone 21 May 1960, the last films being Tarzan the Ape Man and Intent to Kill. When the Semaphore Ozone closed the ground floor seats were removed, while the seats in the foyer and dress circle survived to become part of the later revived Semaphore Cinema.<sup>6</sup>

The Semaphore Youth Club occupied the downstairs section of the building, from 1966 – 1978, placing a boxing ring on the stage. In 1977 Alan and Fran Hall opened a small cinema in former dress circle area.

In 1983 Port Adelaide Council considered converting the theatre into a library with the theatre remaining upstairs, however, due to the effects of video the theatre closed in 1985.

The building was vacant from 1985 – 1993. In 1993 work commenced to convert the former Institute/Theatre into the Semaphore library. Architects Berriman and Associates and builders Coombs and Barei were advised on the buildings conversion and restoration by heritage advisor, Ms Liz Vines. Great care was taken to ensure the conversion from theatre to library was carried out in such a way as to preserve the architecture with lighting and ventilation proving the biggest problems.

The stately interior, ethereal art deco influence, plaster ornamental panels, and the foyer with its chandeliers, panelled walls, ornamental fireplace and impressive stair case are rare in Adelaide.

The Honourable John Oswald MP Minister for Housing, Urban Development and Local Government Relations officially opened the Semaphore Library on Friday 11 February 1994.



## References:

<sup>[1]</sup> *Semaphore Institute (1884, March 17), South Australian Register (Adelaide, SA : 1839 – 1900), p6.*

<sup>[2]</sup> *New Australians in Adelaide (1895, February 2), South Australian Register (Adelaide, SA : 1839 – 1900), p. 5.*

<sup>[3]</sup> *Dance at Semaphore (1910, July 30), The Chronicle (Adelaide, : SA), p. 54.*

<sup>[4]</sup> *A well dressed woman (1918, April 1), The Advertiser (Adelaide, SA : 1889 – 1931), p5.*

<sup>[5]</sup> *Purches, Jack, The Semaphore Town Hall Basement : history by Jack Purches and information about the Semaphore Troop boy Scouts, PAEPLS Local History*

<sup>[6]</sup> *Flint Colin 1994, Semaphore Ozone South Australia, Kino, Journal of the Australian Theatre Historical Society, June 1994, Ligare Pty Ltd, Riverwood, NSW.*

<sup>[7]</sup> *New Semaphore Theatre to be opened tonight (1929, December 9), The South Australian Advertiser (Adelaide, SA : 1889 – 1931), p14.*

<sup>[8]</sup> *New Ozone Theatre, (1929, December 7), The Register News-Pictorial (Adelaide, SA : 1929 – 1931), p. 20.*

<sup>[9]</sup> *"In old Arizona" at the new Ozone, Semaphore (1929, December 7), The Advertiser (Adelaide, SA : 1889 – 1931), p6.*

<sup>[10]</sup> *Theatre opening (1952, November 20), the Advertiser (Adelaide, SA : 1931 – 1954), p14.*

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