

THE MOTION PICTURE BOOTH

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The motion picture booth was inaugurated several years ago when motion pictures began to be used in "Picture Parlors." The pictures were popular and the demand for projecting machines grew faster than the supply with the result that even the poorest kind of machine was salable.

These poor machines with half inclosed arc lamps and the tissue-like film, the only kind available, were the cause of too frequent fires.

A still further factor of hazard was the type of man who first took up the public exhibition of this new show device, a type of man who did not build solidly and for the future but for a "front" and the quick dollar.

So to confine the fire which was almost sure to ensue sooner or later from this combination of flimsy machine, tissue-like film and careless handling, the fire authorities of a large city inaugurated the booth inclosure of metal or asbestos and the regulation was more or less copied by other cities, the idea being to confine such fire as might occur.

But as years passed the machines improved and the film was strengthened, until today the film is twice as thick as it was at first, and machines are now available which totally inclose the film at all points. The machine manufacturer has, therefore, gone about as far as he can go, and it is squarely up to the authorities to make the handling of the film safe, and this can be done most successfully by making the operator work in sight all the time.

The modern machine and film is not a hazardous combination. Whatever danger there is today comes about by the operator fastening the magazine doors open, by smoking, by failure to immediately return the film to its metal container when taken from the machine magazine after its showing, and such like disregard of ordinary caution. This is recognized by municipal authorities and regulations to this effect are almost universal.

But laws will no more stop such practices than laws will prevent theft; and we all unconsciously confess, daily, that, better than law, the way to protect one's personal property is to watch it.

For the same physiological reason the projection room should be wire-glass-walled on two, or three, sides. And also because it would please the skilled, conscientious operator who is proud of his work and workroom, and it is only fair that this justifiable pride should be rewarded by easier public observation.

The concealing booth is an anomaly, anyhow. In no other human employment involving public hazard is the operator concealed from observation. In driving taxicabs, we put tags on the driver and the machine, "so we can get his number;" instinctively we avoid dark

streets, so as not to invite danger from the slinking thug; and even when we put a night watchman to watching a building we put a clock to watching the watchman.

But when it comes to motion pictures, we reverse this natural custom and at least hang around the operator a shower-bath curtain so that nobody can watch him. It would be strange if it did not involve danger, for a booth isn't a factor of safety; on the contrary, it is a hazard, because it invites negligence, or worse.

When this established principle is recognized by our authorities and booths required which do not conceal the operator, the motion picture projector manufacturer will be released from blame for film fires, and we will quickly arrive at a time when "booth fires" will be a thing of the past.

It seems much more sensible to prevent fires than to employ means to confine them when such means only invite a conflagration. Picture film of itself is not unsafe. It does not evaporate and give off inflammable vapors like gasoline nor will it ignite spontaneously, as is proved by the thousands of rolls of picture film on the shelves of photo supply stores all over the world. Tons and tons of it are made daily in Rochester alone, but they have never had a film fire, for all operatives work in the open.

Picture theatre booths should be constructed with the front wall opaque so that the audience may not see or be disturbed by what is happening in the booth, as now arranged, but the booth should have the sides and rear wall of wire-glass, or some such plan as will give an unobstructed view of the inside of the booth at all times, by the owner, by inspectors, and others. (Just why booths are not provided with that excellent fire enemy, the sprinkler system, with inch heads, is inexplicable to me.)

In temporary installations, certainly, the safest plan is to do away with the concealing booth entirely. It is much wiser to require the handling of the film in the open, and where the operator has ample room to work safely, than in the confined space of a shower-bath curtain booth. It may be contended that the curtain is to prevent panic, but one has but to remember that no temporary booth could confine the smoke of burning film, and smoke has caused more panic than fire ever has. Whereas, on the other hand, if there were no booths there would be no fires, where a safe machine is employed.

The concealing booth is a source of unnecessary hazard and the cause of more fires than ever have been prevented thereby, and should, therefore, be done away with.

Daily the picture film is coming more and more to be recognized for what it is, the greatest of all teachers. It speaks the only universal language. No other device equals it for conveying a message, and probably never will.

The invention of the printing press, in the 15th century, gave a tremendous impetus to learning, but it appealed only to a class, for it was limited to those who could read. The invention of the motion picture of the 20th century began a second and greater era of learning for it speaks to the masses as well; to the old and young, to the illiterate as well as the learned of every tongue, and it should not be forgotten

that the illiterate of our earth constitute a body many times greater than those who can read. Again, the printing press must print for each man in his own tongue, while the motion picture prints in a language all can read. The printing press is autocratic, the motion picture democratic.

The immeasurable opportunity for good in the new picture press is rather rapidly coming to be recognized, I am happy to say, but it would go forward with greater stride if the handicap of the unnecessary, hazardous concealing booth, for the class-room, lecture hall, or outdoor gathering, could be removed without delay. Ultimately this requirement will become obsolete and a dead letter just as the prohibition to automobiles aboard ferry boats, but teaching would be the great gainer if this could come soon.

Let us remove unnecessary obstructions to the rapid and wide use in the school room of so wonderful a teacher; and also give to the motion picture in theatres a better name by the use of a glass booth.