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[redacted], [redacted], Lyndhurst, Hants, [redacted] [redacted]

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20.2.95

Dear Both,

I was interested to read your filmgoers' project and wonder whether any of my memories are of interest.

I was growing up in Croydon in the 1920's and 1930's when "going to the pictures" was the main entertainment and interest of people of all ages. There were at least 10 cinemas within bus or cycling distance from my home, all with double features plus Pathe news, "Wonders of Nature", cartoons, and trailers for the following week, or part of the week if programmes were changed midweek. We had a wonderful choice. As well as the film programme, some of the larger cinemas had a floor show, or cinema organ which arose from the depths, and which played for 20 minutes as lights round the stage changed colour. I don't know how we all stayed in our seats for so long!

There were adverts of local shops and businesses thrown up on the screen, which were usually followed by the interval when two "chocolate girls" would sell chocolate and ices. The eager buyers

left their seats and queued to buy, and then the girls would walk up the aisles and sell to seated people who passed the money down the row, and the icecream was passed back. It was all part of the evening. Ices were about 3d or 6d, and nobody ate DURING a film. The slightest rustle of paper brought forth hisses of "ssh" from all around. During this 10 minute interval, usherettes would often walk up the aisles spraying perfumed disinfectant into the air!

Many women wore hats in the 1930's and if one were unlucky enough to sit behind a large one, we plucked up the courage after a ½ hour of peering round it, to ask the woman to "please remove your hat". Some did, some didn't, and at the first opportunity we had to change our seat.

We always watched the screen through a dense haze of drifting smoke because everybody smoked. It was the "in" thing to do, there was no knowledge of the damage nicotine could do, and every film we watched showed our heroes and heroines lighting up all the time. And we copied our heroes.

Film shows were continuous which meant that one often joined the audience half way through the film, and then had to sit until that part came round again and you knew you had seen the entire evening's programme. People with time on their hands could sit there and see the programme through again and again.

All evenings ended with God Save the King, and there was a rush to get out before having to stand still for the anthem to be played whilst a Union Jack or picture of the King was shown on the screen. And of course, the show was followed by a safe walk home in the dark, or a bus ride. Mugging hadn't been invented.

A visit to the pictures was often the venue for a "first date". Seats at 7d (3p) 1/3d (7p) or 1/9d (9p) were the normal, with the most expensive 2/3d (12p) (all approximate conversions) kept for the well heeled audience who were up in the circle. Lesser mortals sat downstairs, the cheaper seats in the front, where the screen loomed large, and the coveted back one and ninepennies for the courting couples. One kept an eye open for the chance of a seat further back as patrons left the cinema and there seemed to be a constant quiet movement as patrons improved their seating positions. Occasionally a quick-eyed usherette would send the mover back to the appropriate priced seat. Money was very short in those days, 5p had to go a very long way.

There was no TV, few people had cars, average wage was about £3 and a visit to the pictures was looked forward to as the weekly or bi-weekly treat. People worked 5 ½ days a week, so Saturday was THE night out with a great rush to change and take a bus to the cinema, and be first in the queue. Weekly magazines, Film Fun, Film Weekly, etc. kept us up to date with the stars and their lives, and for a few hours we could see the opulence and apparent luxury of American homes, especially

kitchens (!), see their lifestyle, and dream. The girl never allowed a kiss on the first or even second date, of course, and my friends and I thought this was the way of the world. Our youthful boyfriends accepted our ruling because, they too, had seen the films, and knew their roles! Doris Day, the girl next door, had a lot to answer for! Incidentally, I saw her last week on the TV, over 70 and looking lovely still.

I don't know what the young people dream about these days: sadly they seem to have seen it all, had it all and done it all by the time they are 14! However, that is old age talking.

I can't recall people copying the violence they saw on the 1930 screens because everything was so out of our way of life. Gangsters rushing about in cars, shoot outs, murders (never actually seen), the star always wearing high fashion slinky long dress every evening for a quiet evening at home, musicals, cowboys, comedies - they were just fantasies.

Nowadays I feel the films try to suggest real life, sordid, violent, etc. etc. young people can imagine themselves doing these things hence the problems of to-day. If I, as a middle-class Convent educated girl, could go through a few weeks of showing off my legs at every opportunity, because people had told me I had legs like Betty Grable, I am sure present day boys and girls are equally influenced by what they see, which is unfortunately much more dangerous than a leg show!

Outside all cinemas one could see orderly queues every evening. These would be controlled by a uniformed commissioner who would call out from time to time "Two seats in the front row", or two singles in the one and nines, and gradually the queue would lessen. It was nothing to wait for an hour or more for a popular film. Often on a bitterly cold night, the commissioner would take pity and admit the rest of the shivering, and generally uncomplaining, queue with permission "to stand at the back of the cinema".

I can still remember the excitement of eventually going through the door after waiting in the rain or snow for an hour. That overpowering smell of perfume and - whatever it was, the warmth, and the anticipation of going through into the auditorium following the usherette's light, falling over people's feet and settling down in the seat.

For 3 hours the outside world was forgotten, worries over school, work, relationships, money disappeared as we lived through the screen. And we did copy the screen actors. In the same way that I believe the young people copy their pop idols, and TV characters nowadays, we too followed our heroes and heroines. The sad difference is that nowadays the "heroes" are too often violent, undisciplined and to my ears rude.

In "my day", the characters we adored and talked about were usually pure and brave and clean living, the good guy always won, and the baddies got their just desserts. One can still see these black and white films on TV to-day, and we perhaps laugh at them, but we youngsters took them seriously, copied hairstyles, mannerisms and fashions just as avidly as the teenagers to-day.

Love scenes were almost non-existent with the film ending often without a kiss between hero and heroine. And of course, the accents were too reformed and posh for words! All the girls spoke so naively, and even the barmaid with a heart of gold would say "Oh lor lummy sir, you are a card", with a cut glass cockney accent. And we teenagers all copied this rather posh talk, in the same way that the present teenagers all seem to talk in the foreign T-less, expletive showered language of their pop idols.

The musical was a great favourite with Ginger and Fred of course, and the many songs from these films were known to everyone. Murders, one never saw the actual violence, and thrillers were popular with the Russian or Japanese villain. And there were the weepies. I was hooked on cowboys and Indians, and with my equally hooked father, never missed a Buck Jones film, but with two feature films at every performance, it was impossible not to find something to enthral.

As I have mentioned, Doris Day was a great role model, and we schoolgirls rushed about being fresh and squeaky clean and polite to our mothers, and the boy friends, when pocket money permitted, would arrive on the doorstep with a 5p box of chocolates. I remember I had a couple of days slinking about like Veronica Lake with my hair draped over one eye, bumping into things and tossing my head until my mother put a very firm stop to that nonsense. Mothers were very much in control in those days - at least in my neck of the woods.

As a final thought, I can remember one cinema in Croydon where, during the afternoon interval, a free cup of tea, with choice of a biscuit or a cigarette was brought to all patrons!!

During the war, the cinemas remained open, and if an air raid started, a warning was put on the screen. Patrons could then leave and make their way to a shelter, or rush home, or move back in the theatre so that they sat under the circle, where it was hoped it might be safer. At least one Croydon theatre received a direct [bomb hit] which killed many people.

Is this the sort of thing you are looking for for your book I wonder?

The cinema was the main entertainment of my generation, and I still know the names of so many of the actors. Nowadays they are dying rather too frequently, and each death takes a little of my youth. I can remember them when we were all young, and it is sad to see them go. Handsome, brave, witty, you name it they were it, Gregory Peck, Cary Grant, Robert Young, Clark Gable are just some of the

men I grew up with, and when I see them now, grown old and grey with me, I feel sad, but can remember them as they were.

The last time I went to the cinema was years ago. The sound was so loud it was painful, the cost was out of this world, and there was just one film for which we had to book. Not like the 1930's [sic].

I have repeated myself I am afraid, but have just rattled off a few thoughts as they came to me. Hope they are of interest.

Yours sincerely,

(Mrs) Margaret Houlgate