Reverend G. D. Forssell and His Magic Lantern Shows:

A Clue to America's Popular Imagination in the 1890s

by
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In the early 1890s, itinerant minister G. D. Forssell of Lansing, Iowa toured Iowa and Minnesota as a traveling lecturer. For a modest admission fee, his audiences saw a set of over 120 glass slides picturing the "Life of Christ," the "Evils of a Great City," and the dangers of alcohol, all projected by an acetylene lamp onto a sheet or screen. Before radio, before motion pictures, even before good half-tone reproductions in newspapers and magazines, this ancestor to the nickleodeon was immensely popular all over America at the end of the nineteenth century. Magic lantern shows had been around for at least a century, and in America had played an important social role. Covering a vast range of subjects, shows like Forssell's entertained and instructed audiences in every corner of the country and often helped to create the atmosphere for social reform movements.

Of Forssell himself, little is known; most of his slides, however, have survived, and they are now part of the collection at Gibb Farm Museum in St. Paul, Minnesota. The collection includes Forssell's Sears Magic lantern, its leather case, some 70 of the approximately 120 slides making up his original collection, and an orange, black-lettered handbill. Forssell used commercially-produced black-and-white and hand-colored slides, and if he followed the custom of the day, he spoke to the images on the screen rather than from an elaborately prepared text.

Forssell undoubtedly found a ready response as he told the familiar story of Jesus. The Bible was an integral part of late nineteenth-century life and a staple of popular reading. Several American clergymen wrote best-selling books on the life of Jesus, and the New Testament frequently served as a source for commercial stereo cards. Unfortunately, only one of Forssell's slides from this series survives -- a hand-colored illustration of a sunset -- so one can only speculate whether Forssell's complete show contained slides of similar illustrations, live actors posing in biblical costumes, or both. Indeed, the use of images of live actors is entirely possible since that practice was widespread among both amateur and professional photographers of the day. The mid-nineteenth-century English pictorialist photographer Oscar Rejlander,

TWO BIG LECTURES

"Evils of a Great City"

Giving in a most attractive way the shameful life of a great city. The cause why the many thousands of laboring people have to live poorly while their employers have fine dwellings, are well-living and piling up their thousands and millions. The wages-question and what the laboring people should do NOW to rise and better their conditions is remarkably explained in this lecture.

"Life of Christ"

A fine collection of noted events from the miraculous and wonderful life of our Saviour Jesus Christ here on earth beautifully illustrated by 60 fine Colored Lantern Slides. It is a choice lot out of the many

These lectures are illustrated by about 120 nearly all fine colored slides, illuminated on the canvas in tall, clear views by my Acetylene Magic Lantern.

Don't let a good opportunity go by. Ask for ticket today. Which one is to precede is reserved by the owner.

REV. G. D. FORSSELL.

Rev. Forssell's handbill.

for example, created his famous and popular "Two Ways of Life" allegory in this manner, as did Julia Margaret Cameron when she made her illustrations for an 1874 edition of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. So, too, did Alexander Black, who produced photo-plays for late-nineteenth-century American lantern slide show audiences. Examples of posed photographs also exist in one of Forssell's shows, "Evils of a Great City." If Forssell's "Life of Christ" show did use images of live actors, it might well be seen as a precursor to later film spectaculars such as *The Robe* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.

Temperance, Forssell's second theme, also would have sounded familiar to his audience, and they were probably sympathetic to the message. Anti-liquor agitation and temperance movements had been prominent in the upper Midwest since the earliest days of settlement. Newspaper articles and editorials against the evils of drink were plentiful throughout the last half of the nineteenth century, and Iowa had outlawed liquor in the 1880s.

Judging from the surviving slides, the model on which Forssell based his temperance message was probably T. S. Arthur's *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room and What I Saw There* (1854). Long forgotten except by antiquarians and social historians, Arthur's novel stands as one of the significant books of the nineteenth century. Its enormous sales gave a great boost to the movement to enact state prohibition laws, and it probably ranks second only to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in terms of contemporary impact. Like Stowe's novel, *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* was also made into a play, and its success spawned numerous other melodramas on the same theme. Variations continued to occur in the popular arts well into the twentieth century. In 1909, for example, D. W. Griffith used this theme in his film, *The Drunkard's Reformation*, and drinking and bar-room scenes appeared in his *Broken Blossoms* (1919) where they helped to show the cause of the brutal character of the antagonist. In the preface to the 1860 edition, Arthur's publisher noted that *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* "is marred by no exaggerations, but exhibits the actualities of bar-room life, and the consequences flowing therefrom, with a severe simplicity, and adherence to truth, that gives to every picture a Daguerrian vividness." When Forssell added slides to this narrative, the publisher's point became literally true.

Forssell's temperance message began "scientifically." He showed eight artist's sketches depicting the inside of the hu-

man stomach as it progressed from "Temperance," through "Moderate Drinker," "Drunkard," and finally to "Drunkard on Verge of Grave." The series ended with a slide labelled "Appearance of Stomach during Delirium Tremens," to reinforce its rather grisly "scientific" point.

Next, using slides of artist's drawings made by "McIntosh Stereoptican Co., 35 & 37 Randolph Street, Chicago, Ill.," Forssell told the stories of two families. Parallelling Hogarth's "The Rake's Progress," he began with a slide of a dapper young man entering his home and being greeted by his happy wife and children. Then, the young man was pictured drinking gaily at a fashionable hotel bar. The remaining slides documented his degradation. He was shown returning home drunk, carousing in lower class bars, being arrested for drunkenness and finally being driven by drink into hallucinations, robbery, and murder. His family was also dragged into poverty and despair by his drunkenness. In the last slide, he was shown dying alone on a riverbank while lightening flashed ominously in the background. The lesson could not have been put more harshly.

The second tale, however, was more cheerful. In "The Drunkard's Reform," the main character was not a dapper dandy but a sturdy, bearded workingman who stopped off at a saloon for beer. His daughter, who was with him, was taunted by another, better dressed child. As the caption noted, "His child's clothes are ridiculed and his pride is touched." Immediately, "He forms a resolution and leaves the tavern," and when he arrives home, "He informs his wife of his resolve." Shortly thereafter, "His sobriety raises him to the position of foreman," and in the last slide, his wife and three children are seen enjoying the "Happy Home of a Temperate Man." Forssell's message was melodramatic, simple, and quite clear. Art, entertainment, and morality had all combined for a single purpose.

While temperance and the life of Christ were common themes, Forssell's "Evils of a Great City" lecture promised a taste of the exotic. It was no accident that it received top billing on his advertising poster. Although he used some slides of drawings and some of professional actors, the majority of the city views were documentary images. As a result, these slides were realistic in a way the others were not. If Forssell had taken the photographs himself, which is possible but very unlikely, he would rank as a minor social documentary photographer. The best images offer a vivid portrayal of end of the century urban life. But these were undoubtedly commercially made slides (though the photographer and company producing them are not recorded), and it is important to note that these photographs -- as was often the case with images made of New York and other cities during this period -- copied the format, and sometimes even the scenes, found in the work of Jacob A. Riis.

It is very likely that these slides provided Forssell's audience with their first pictures of a major city and its poverty. The city was New York, with its street scenes, tenements, ten-cent-a-night flophouses, dormitories for homeless newsboys, street "toughs," bootblacks, and even "Labor Agitators." His shots of the "Street Arabs," "The First Development of Character," and "The Little Beggar Girl" were stark, direct images. They have lost none of their power over the

years. Yet, interlaced with the realistic portrayal of urban life are other images that display Forssell's rural morality. While he acknowledged the city's poverty, he also linked it directly with his earlier message of temperance.

There were many slides of saloons, "growler gangs," a man lying drunk on a sidewalk, a "Drunkard's Widow," an "Arrest for Drunkenness," a pawn shop, the race track, pool playing, and card playing. There were also scenes of a murder (posed), a police van, a court room, and several images of prisons and prison life. These included views of Sing Sing, prisoners having dinner at Blackwell's Island, and a Sunday church service at the Tombs. Finally, there were a number of images of death -- the morgue, a prisoner's burial, and Potter's Field, the pauper's burial ground.

It should also be noted how these slides are captioned: "Little Waifs at Supper," "First Glance at a Tenement House District," "Wharf Rats," "Betting Stand at the Race Track," "The Little Beggar Girl," "The Young Bootblack," "Murder," "Blackwell's Island, Prisoners Marching to Dinner," and so on. The company that made these slides mixed realism and melodrama in a manner extremely fashionable in late nineteenth-century America. Some of the captions are factual, but others remind us of Horatio Alger's stories. This sensibility was so pervasive that even Theodore Dreiser fell into the practice, blending these modes in the story and chapter titles of *Sister Carrie* (1900).

It is clear from this conglomerate of slides that Forssell saw a direct relationship between alcohol and urban poverty, intemperance, gambling, crime, and death. His solution to these city problems can be deduced from the last three slides of his show. These are "Central Park," a placid landscape scene, "Summer Holiday in the Country," where a city boy is depicted happily plowing a field behind a horse, and "The Sheaf of Wheat," an artist's sketch showing wheat being made into bread (happiness and life) or beer (destruction and death).

Despite his rather simplistic outlook, Forssell's use of the photograph enabled him to achieve a realism possible only through this medium. Thus he joined a small, but select, group in American life. It included Episcopal Rector John T. McCook, who took photographs of New Haven, Connecticut slum areas and Jacob A. Riis, who took the now famous images of New York's poor, immigrant sections. McCook used his photographs to better local conditions, and Riis pioneered in using both photographs and the travelling lantern slide show as a means of social reform.

Though the burden of Forssell's message was the evils of city life and the need for temperance and self-control, his slide shows may have also aided the growing sentiment for social justice legislation. As such, he would have helped prepare the group for the early twentieth-century phenomenon of Progressivism with its numerous reform measures. When Rev. G. D. Forssell presented his magic lantern slide shows, he may have thought he was merely telling the life of Christ and of the evils of alcohol and big cities. But his message had broader implications. □

THE DRUNKARD

1. "Domestic Happiness -- the Greatest of earthly blessings."

Note on Sources

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The basic sources for this article are as follows: The original slides and handbill are held by Gibb Farm Museum, St. Paul, Minnesota. For references to film and the lantern slide show, see Gerald Mast, *A Short History of the Movies*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, 1976). For references to the history of photography, see Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day*, rev. ed. (New York, 1964); and Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, *The History of Photography from the Camera Obscura to the Beginning of the Modern Era* (New York, 1969). Other references useful to this study are Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (Univeristy Park, Pa., 1967); T. S. Arthur, *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room and What I Saw There* (Philadelphia, 1860 [also available in a modern Belknap Press ed.]); Lawrence Gowing, *Hogarth* (London, 1974); Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York, 1890); and Ferenc M. Szasz and Ralph F. Bogardus, "The Camera and the American Social Conscience: The Documentary Photography of Jacob A. Riis," *New York History*, 55 (October 1974), 408-36.

2. "Introduction of Sorrow -- A Loving Heart Made Sad."

3. *Arrested for drunkenness.*

4. *Death of a drunkard.*

THE DRUNKARD'S REFORM

1. Drinking at the bar.

2. "His child's clothes are ridiculed and his pride is touched."

3. *"He forms a resolution and leaves the tavern."*

4. *"He informs his wife of his resolve."*

5. *"His sobriety raises him to the position of Foreman."*

6. *"Happy Home of a Temperate Man."*