

Lean times for movie

By MARYBETH VARCADOS

This may be the age of automatic but the show, as always, must go on.

"And that's why they are still hiring us — the machines must be threaded. They still need us," said Harlow Packard and an almost imperceptible sadness flickered across his usually stoic countenance.

Packard sat quietly inside his wood-frame bungalow on Blanca Lane, reaching to pet his little dog Fritz. His sister and housemate, Florence Packard, sat quietly nearby as he talked. An afternoon ends early at their house because by 6 p.m. he must be in Santa Cruz, threading film into the big Century projector.

"Nowadays it's more just a job than a pleasure, and a lonely job at that. It's not the same trade," he observed, with thoughts that span his 80 years.

Packard was born Nov. 10, 1900, and came to Green Valley Road with his parents just in time for the Big Earthquake. He's the last living charter member of the IATSE, International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and Moving Picture Operators of the United States and Canada, founded under the Knights of Labor in 1870 as a stage craft in New York City. Packard is president of the Monterey Bay chapter, which meets monthly in Watsonville. Of 40 members, he said, about 28 are actually working. Four of those are women.

They are working without a contract right now, with their lawyer in the negotiating stage.

Automation has been the downfall for movie projectionists, he explained. In their heyday, they were well-paid, sought-after technicians, earning as much as plumbers and carpenters. Now just one man is responsible for a movie house, or even for multiple houses. Four-plex theaters in nearby towns are handled by just one projectionist; a drive-in in San Jose has 10 screens.

"And it's not well-paying, considering the other crafts. We haven't kept up with our salaries; we're not proud of them. Of course, they tell us it is too much," he said.

Packard made \$3 every Sunday in pre-union vaudeville days; \$7.50 for the day (three shows) after the union came in. And now, top of the scale, is \$7.50 an hour, with a six-hour shift. Projectionists in metropolitan areas can make \$13 an hour.

Schooling never was Packard's interest. He attended the Pajaro "College of Knowledge," the elementary school near the railroad, and lasted two years at WHS before dropping out. Work came easy as a plow man; he worked teams in the valley fields. At 18, he became a clerk for the railroad, "before me and the boss agreed to disagree," then he went back to the family's Aromas ranch. For a while, he drove a truck and got into hauling trunks for the vaudeville shows. He became buddies with the stage crew, and eventually got on the job with them.

Vaudeville shows played every Sunday at the Old T&D Junior, which was later the Appleton and then the State Theater. Then the shows, and the crew, moved to the California Theater (later the Fox.)

When picture shows came along in early 1929, he learned to be an

projectionists

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— Harlow Packard, president of the movie projectionists' union.



Photo by Sam Vestal.

Rural life occupies the projectionist's day-times.

operator and went to work at the new Santa Cruz Theater (now gone) at Walnut and Pacific.

He handled the highly flammable nitrate films with great care, because fires were not uncommon in the projectionist's booth in those days. The sound came from records, making the operators' life interesting when record and film got out of synchronization.

"A buzzer'd start buzzing, and one guy would try to jump the groove in the record and the other guy would watch and tell him how close we were coming. We had two records, in case one got wrecked. Those things weighed more than the film!"

The night they played "Meet Me in St. Louis," they lost a few feet of film because of fire. "We spent the rest of the night trying to get it in synch! I can tell you, the audience didn't appreciate watching blank film while the record was still going."

Then came sound and film run together, a blessing for guys like Packard. He stayed with the Santa Cruz theater until 1935, then returned to the State in his hometown until 1942 when the Fox on Main Street opened.

When The Fox sold out to Mexican owners in 1972, Packard went on to

his present job, at the Rio Theater. "In them early days, the machine was not as well made or as complicated as today. Now you find more varieties. I guess I'd say the Simplex is one of the oldest and most popular."

At age 50, Packard married. His wife Leita died in 1977. Through his stepchildren, he has 10 grandchildren.

He thinks back nostalgically to "pre-Boob Tube" days, when going to the movies was just about the only entertainment a person had.

"Our steady customers never missed a change. Now people think it's something wonderful to say they haven't been in a theater for 15 years." But lately movies are popular again, he added, even though tickets cost a lot, and the houses are small. "Why, in its heyday, the Del Mar seated 1,400 people. Now it is a quadruple house, and each theater seats just about 125."

Movies? He's seen 'em all. Can't remember how many times he's seen "The Wizard of Oz."

He'll never forget the first sound picture, "Wings," because the record player was in front of the theater, keeping the operators running.

"Wings had a good run — three or four days," he recalls. Now, a pic-

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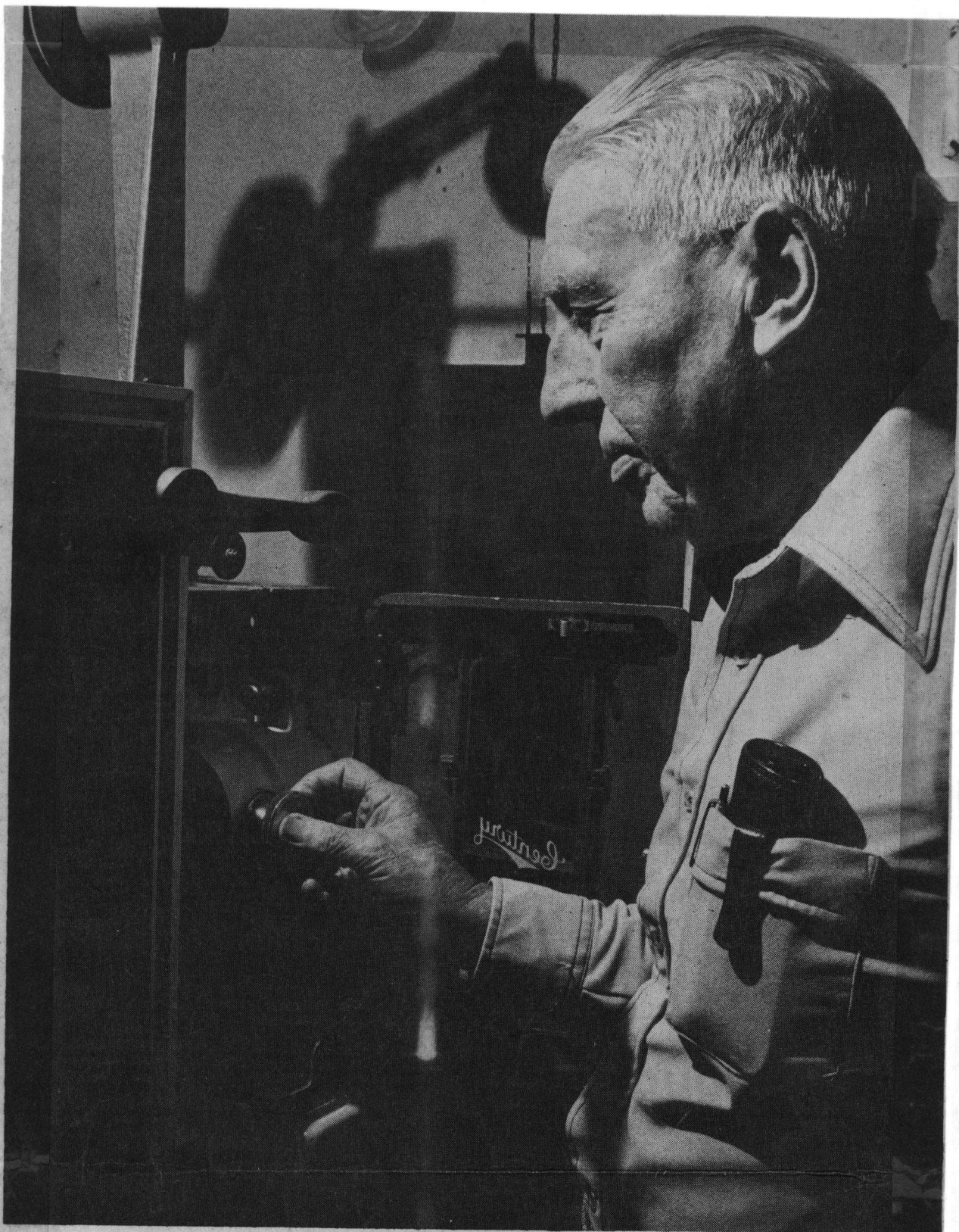


Photo by Sam Vestal

Trained film projectionists, like Harlow Packard, are not obsolete, yet.

ture at the Rio may run six months or longer. "The Longest Yard" with Burt Reynolds went almost a year at the Rio. "Star Trek" was good, too, he recalls — five or six months.

Movies bomb, of course. Just lately, "Tribute" with Jack Lemmon was a no-draw.

Sex and violence in films doesn't particularly bother Packard, who's seen some changes in his years.

"But I'll admit I'm a little bit of a prude. They are a little too sexy. But you've got to realize it's just a picture, same with horror movies, if that class of entertainment entertains you."

"I get a kick out of the background — like in "Jaws" — how they manipulated it all."

Eighteen years ago, he was "in" his first movie, on a crew in Monte-

rey and Carmel for "Tolerable David."

It is hard work," he said. "Too hard for an old man. The crew — the grips, the clearers, spot men and reflector men — they're a separate part of the union. They're in better shape than the projectionists."

Four years ago, the projectionists went on strike over wages and new contracts. The issue was automation and burn business, said Packard. "They locked us out," he said.

Right now, John Skorski of Capitol Theater is vice-president of the union. Ann Irving who works at the Sash Mill is recording secretary; Robert Morgan of a Salinas drive-in is financial secretary; and Ernie Allbright of UA Cinema Santa Cruz is the business agent.

The large theater staffs of yester-

year are gone, too, Packard pointed out. Now there's just the manager, someone at the candy counter, someone at the box office, and the projectionist. No more usherettes. And they're trying to automate the projection to the point where the manager will simply press a button at the candy counter to start the movie.

Visitors in the projectionist's booth were forbidden in the old days because of fire hazard, but now they're allowed, with permission of the manager. Usually, however, Packard reads magazines, resisting the urge sometimes to doze.

His age has been a discussion point for theater managers, but he's tenacious about keeping his job. "I've nothing to retire to. This is work I've enjoyed all my life. Why give it up? I'm not making no fortune."