

## HARRY CLAY

(1865-1925) Harry Clay got his first big career break with Frank Smith in 1885 and later appeared with F. E. Hiscocks, Dan Tracey and Harry Rickards among other. He toured his own combination, the Australian Eleven (1896-99) and in toured Queensland annually between 1901 and 1918. Clay established a permanent Sydney circuit in 1905, built the Bridge Theatre (Newtown) in 1913 and later operated several regional NSW circuits. He was also associated for many years with the Coliseum (North Sydney), and Princess and Gaiety theatres.

The following entry is an abridged and updated version of "[From Minstrel Tenor to Vaudeville Showman: Harry Clay - "The Friend of the Australian Performer."](#)" *Australasian Drama Studies* 34 (1999), 11-24.

For more extensive details, including career chronology, business and personal details, anecdotes and quotations etc, see: "[Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company – 1865-1930](#)" (1998 MA Thesis) and "[Harry Clay: Career and Personal Chronology, 1865-1925.](#)"

[NB: New details located since 1999 have been entered into this biography in **plum-coloured** print.]

The youngest surviving child of a London-born dealer John Clay and his wife Mary, who came from the Windsor district of NSW, Harry Clay<sup>1</sup> was born at Patrick's Plains, near Singleton (NSW) on 10 May 1865. He grew up in Newcastle from around the age of eight and at 18 was apprenticed into the plastering trade, while filling his spare time playing with several amateur theatre groups. He also developed his singing voice through an association with the local church choirs, and later became identified with the Great Northern Variety Company around Newcastle. It is also known that he toured the northern rivers of NSW with an amateur minstrel troupe in the early 1880s. Clay is believed to have begun his professional career in late 1885 when he undertook an eighteen month engagement with Sydney-based entrepreneur Frank Smith (Alhambra Theatre and Sir Joseph Banks Pavilion and Pleasure Grounds, Botany). During the next five years or so Clay's name is also associated with various small operations, including the Bondi Aquarium, Walsh and King's Minstrels, the Federal Minstrels, and the "Peoples Popular Concerts" held in the city's Protestant Hall. During 1889 Clay appeared with W. J. Wilson's Anglo-American Frolics, the Great Faust Perman Combination, H. Florack's Federal Minstrels, and with F.E. Hiscocks' London Pavilion Co, a troupe that also included John Fuller Snr.



*Australian Variety* 23 May (1917), 1.

Clay gradually established a solid reputation over the next few years, playing engagements with various companies and donating his time for benefits to other professional theatre people. By 1891 Clay's reputation was such that he was offered an 18 month engagement with American entrepreneur, Dan Tracey (playing seasons in Tracey's Melbourne and Sydney theatres). In December 1892 he and his wife Kate joined Walshe's Novelty Company for a season at the Sydney School of Arts. The pair travelled to Brisbane with the company in late January the following year. That engagement was disrupted for several weeks, however, when the city was flooded. 1893 also saw Clay make his debut at the Tivoli (Syd). The three months engagement, which began on 12 June, is believed to have been his only appearance on a Rickards bill. He also began taking on managerial positions from around this period (including that of stage manager), with several of these companies touring Queensland. One of these tours was the ill-fated 1893 Queensland tour with Walshe's Novelty Company, which was forced to close a week into its Brisbane season due to the massive flood which hit the city. Clay's engagements also invariably included his wife, Kate, and daughter Essie, the latter having been a performer since infancy. Kate Clay more often than not worked under the stage name of Kate Henry, taking her husband's birth name as her surname. He on the other hand had, by the mid 1890s, taken to using Harry rather than Henry.

In mid-1893 Clay made his debut (and only) engagement with Harry Rickards, playing the entrepreneur's Sydney Tivoli Theatre for some three months. The following year he returned to Brisbane, this time for an engagement with Lawton and Leslie's All Nations Company at the Theatre Royal. He opened with the company on 17 February and

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<sup>1</sup> Clay's birth certificate indicates that his parents named him Henry. Although no middle name is evident on that document, a letter from solicitor George A. Robinson in to the Government Savings Bank of New South Wales regarding Clay's estate (dated 17 March 1925) identifies him as Henry Walter Clay. See "Papers sin the estate of Henry Clay Late of Vaucluse." State Government Archives. Deceased Files 20/1021 No 11278.

continued through until at least 20 April. By the end of the following month he was in Wollongong with Hosea Easton's Georgia Minstrels (*Illawarra Mercury* 24 May, 2). From around 1894 Clay also began his long association with the Newtown district, taking on a managerial role at St George's Hall. In 1895 he again toured Queensland, with an extended season in Brisbane at the Gaiety Theatre around August - October, first for Warren's Surprise Party and later for W. A. Ball's Surprise Party. He also appeared on the bill of a benefit for Helen Gordon in October. The following year he formed the Australian Eleven, a troupe which he toured intermittently around the Sydney suburbs and through several regional areas over the next four years. Although initially comprising eleven performers, by 1897 the company had effectively doubled its number. The breaks between the Australian Eleven tours were largely due to his commitments with other companies, notably Billy Speed's World's Novelty Co (1896), the Mascotte Minstrels and Variety Co (1898), J. L. Travers' Continental Vaudeville Co (1898) and G. Sullivan's Continental Vaudeville Co (1899). The In 1898 Continental Vaudeville Company tour of Queensland saw him continue to combine his duties as a singer and stage manager. He returned the state following year with the Sullivan company.

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In 1900 Clay and his wife and daughter made what is believed to have been their last tour under another company's banner - this being the Walter Bell Waxworks, Boer and London Vaudeville Company. Before heading north to Queensland the company played a season at the Masonic Hall, Sydney. This engagement became somewhat inauspicious, however, when Clay and Bell were fined 10s in a Sydney court for having caused a pig to be cruelly treated. Details of what occurred are as yet unknown, with the *Sydney Morning Herald* simply reporting that "the animal [had been] introduced in connection with an Irish song during one of the company's performances" (11 Apr. 1900, 8). Another performer, Archibald Abbott was also fined for operating an illegal lottery.<sup>2</sup>

*Australian Variety* 23 May (1917), n. pag.

After playing a season in Grafton in late December 1900, Clay took his company to Lismore and Then Bathurst before heading north through NSW and into Queensland. This tour became the first of 18 annual NSW/Queensland tours, lasting through until the Spanish Flu epidemic forced him to cancel in 1918. By then Clay's Sydney and regional NSW operations were demanding more of his resources, while competition in the far north meant that his visits there were no longer as lucrative as before. Until then, however, each of these tours had lasted around six months on average. During the early years Clay's Queensland circuit played only the major centres, in some places up to two weeks at a time. He only rarely played Brisbane, however, due in part to the domination of Ted Holland in that city. In 1908 he also toured a dramatic company through Queensland, and the following year sent Scottish tragedian Walter Bentley on a tour through the same state, with the repertoire being a combination of Shakespeare and melodrama. In Sydney meanwhile, Clay cemented his status as one of the city's leading suburban managers, and though his circuit was relatively small in comparison to his later operations, it remained remarkably stable - at least from the second half of the decade. Initially the circuit comprised the Petersham, Parramatta, and Balmain town halls, along with the St George's Hall, Newtown, and the Masonic Hall at North Sydney and in the city, relocating in 1910 from the latter venue to the Standard Theatre in Castlereagh Street. The popularity of his Saturday evening show at that theatre saw it eventually called Clay's Standard Theatre.



**Harry Clay's Bridge Theatre, Newtown**  
From the *Newtown Diamond Jubilee Souvenir: 1862-1922*

In 1912 Clay formed a partnership with Harold T. Morgan (Sydney solicitor, Newtown alderman and both past and future Mayor) and Archibald Abbott, who by then become a local businessman. This company, known as the Bridge Theatre Co Pty Ltd, built Clay's Sydney headquarters in 1913. He opened the theatre on 19 July, the same day he also commenced operations at the Coliseum, North Sydney and the National Theatre, Balmain. With these three

<sup>2</sup> Abbott was fined £2 by the court after being found guilty of contravening the Lotteries Act. The *Sydney Morning Herald* records that "each person paying for admission to the entertainment participated in the drawing for the suite of furniture." Bell's company was fined an additional £3 for the breach (11 Apr. 1900, 8).



venues operating six days a week (with alternating nights of vaudeville and drama), Clay closed down all of his other suburban shows. By December that year, however, Clay made the decision to close down the Balmain and North Sydney ventures and focus on the Bridge Theatre. He did, however, continue running shows on Saturday nights at the Coronation Theatre, Leichhardt.

In 1916 Clay was ready to once again expand - both with his theatrical activities and his business operations. Within the year he had formed what was to become the largest vaudeville booking agency in the country - Harry Clay's Theatrical Enterprises and Theatrical Booking Offices. He then reintroduced his Sydney circuit, (including in it the Coliseum Theatre at North Sydney, which was to become one of his most popular venues), and was soon operating between two to four companies around a variety of suburbs throughout the extent of the Sydney metropolitan area. This expansion also involved a south-west NSW country circuit which encompassed towns from Goulburn to Albury and returning through Bathurst, Katoomba and Lithgow. Each company of performers would operate on a rotation system, moving from one circuit to another in order to offer patrons maximum variety.

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*Gympie Times* 10 June (1916), 1

Harry Clay's most dynamic expansion activity lasted from 1916 until 1919, at which point the Spanish Flu epidemic forced the closure of most public entertainment activities around the country. The closure of his Queensland tours and the New South Wales country circuit was most likely due, however, to the expanding competition brought about by the film exhibitors. Upon the reopening of the theatres after the lifting of the Flu restrictions, and with his activities now free of long distance managing, Clay once again focused his attention on the Sydney circuit, and in particular the opportunities available in the inner city precinct.

Clay's later city operations are the best known of his activities. They include a highly successful association with the Princess Theatre at Railway Square, and the new Gaiety Theatre at the south-east corner of Hyde Park. Of the two theatres, it would be the larger Princess Theatre which would dominate Clay's attention, even outstripping his home base the Newtown Bridge Theatre. Around the same time, too, he began sending companies to Newcastle for week long engagements, something he was again to do in 1922, when he took over the Ike Beck Hunter circuit. In addition to this the company returned to Wollongong, where it apparently had established a strong audience base in the past.

A pattern of cyclic growth and consolidation seems to have occurred between 1919 and 1925, at which point the company went into crisis mode when Harry Clay died - presumably the result of poor health following his stroke in 1921. Although he is known to have returned to work sometime in 1922, a number of reports suggest that he was far from his old self. A court action taken against him in 1923 by an ex-conductor is certainly seen as a further blow to his vitality. Despite being given a positive verdict by the judge, and supported in no uncertain terms by the industry trade magazines, it seems that within a year Clay had retired from the public arena. Indeed, it is reported that for the last 12 months of his life he was seen by no one other than his small circle of intimate friends. Some three months after the surprise death of long time associate Jimmy Boyle, Harry Clay also died, close to midnight on the 17th February 1925.

Following the loss of the company's founder, producer and popular singer Maurice Chenoweth took over the role of Managing Director, supported by Bill Sadler (brother of entrepreneur Harry Sadler), Wally Edwards, and later on ex-Clay's performer Stan Kerridge. The company did not renew its lease of the Princess Theatre in 1926, and instead opened at the Sydney Hippodrome (Saturdays only) in order to keep its hold on the city audience. A report in the *Illawarra Mercury* in early 1928 indicates, too, that Clays Vaudeville Company was still operating in that city at least once a night, with Billy Cass reported as heading a troupe at the Crown Theatre on 9 March (9 March 1928, 10). The Gaiety Theatre is also believed to have remained a stronghold for Clay's, as was the Bridge Theatre until the company ceased its theatrical operations in late 1929. In December of that year one-time *Australian Variety* editor Harry Kitching took



**Clay's Princess Theatre, ca. early 1920s**  
 (Courtesy of Jon Fabian)

over the lease of the Bridge Theatre, opening a season with his wife Amy Rochelle and Nat Phillips. Although Clay's divested itself of theatrical pursuits, it is believed to have continued operating, mainly leasing out properties such as the Newtown Theatre. **The company is known to have stayed in business until it sold the theatre to the family-operated Louis Film Company in 1966.** The Bridge Theatre (now The Hub) stands as one of the few purpose-built variety theatres remaining since the halcyon days of vaudeville.

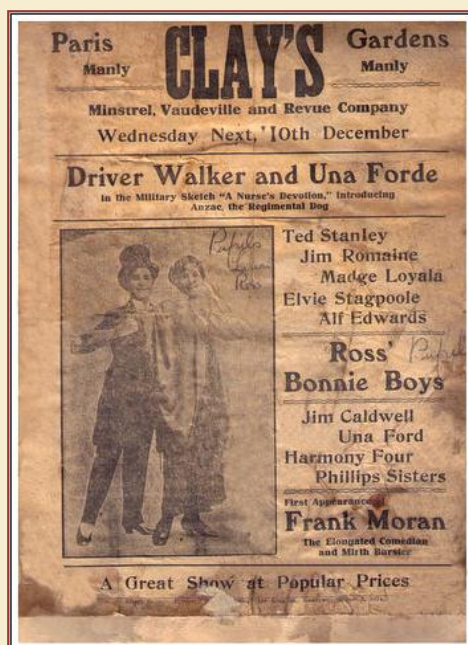
Of the thousands of performers employed by Clay's company over its 30 years, the vast majority were either Australian-born or based. Some of the more recognisable of these are Roy Rene, J. C. Bain, George Sorlie and George Wallace. Others of note include the "Sentimental Bloke," Arthur Tauchert; one of Australia's premier principle boys Amy Rochelle; Vaude and Verne (patterologists); Charles Norman; Australia's premier coon singer Maud Fanning (sister of Charles Fanning), and her children and husband Arthur Elliot; Nellie Kolle, Arthur Morley, George Edwards, Bert Le Blanc, Delavale and Gilbert and Harry Sadler. [See the AVTA's "Research Lists" page for an extensive and updated listing of performers associated with Harry Clay's operations]

While Clay has been noted for his fierce loyalty to Australian artists - his role in assisting the emerging local artist was seen by many of the day as second to none. He was not, however, un-obliging when it came to overseas artists who had finished their contracts with the Tivoli or Fullers' organisations. He was able to offer many of these artists extended stays in the country at reasonable rates of pay, and in doing so he not only raised the perceived standard of his own operations but helped provide invaluable professional influences for his emerging artists.

Perhaps Harry Clay's greatest contribution, however, was his ability to maintain his operations virtually continuously over at least a twenty-five year period, thereby providing reliable support to the A circuit companies. Even though he was forced to close down his Sydney circuit on a couple of occasions, Clay maintained his momentum by continuing his Queensland tours. No other vaudeville entrepreneurs other than Rickards and the Fullers were able to emulate this achievement. In this regard Harry Clay's role as friend and mentor to the Australian performer stands, perhaps, as his most significant achievement.

### **SEE ALSO**

- [Clay's Bridge Theatre Ltd](#)
- [Bridge Theatre](#) (Newtown)
- [Australian Eleven Minstrel & Variety Co](#)
- [Gaiety Theatre](#) (Oxford St, Sydney)
- [Harry Clay's No 1 Musical Comedy Co](#)
- [Harold T. Morgan](#)
- [Harry Clay's Theatrical Agency and Booking Offices](#)
- [Harry Clay's Annual NSW/Queensland Waxworks, Comedy and Vaudeville Tours](#)
- ["From Minstrel Tenor to Vaudeville Showman: Harry Clay - "The Friend of the Australian Performer""](#) (Australasian Drama Studies)
- ["Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company – 1865-1930."](#) (1998 MA Thesis).
- [Princess Theatre](#) (Sydney)
- [Essie Clay](#)
- [Kate Clay](#)
- [Coliseum Theatre](#) (North Sydney)
- [A. R. Abbott](#)

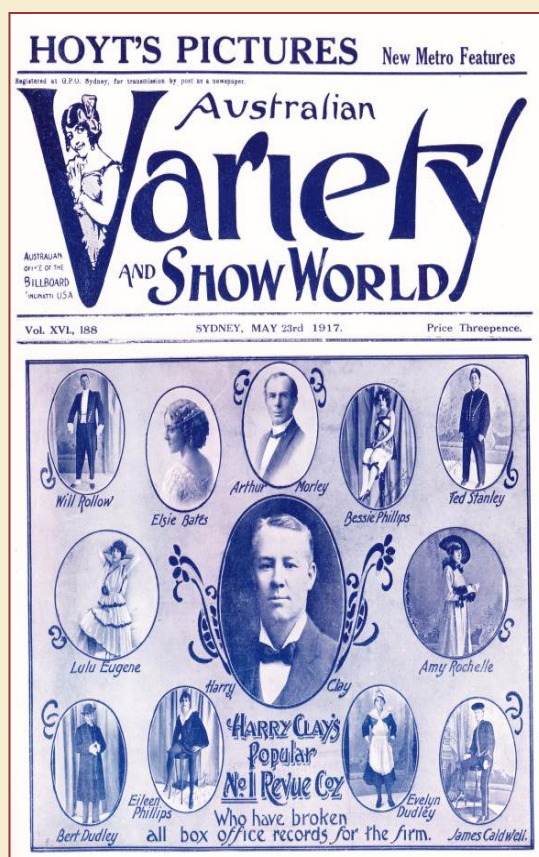


Courtesy of Barbara Peek.



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*Australian Variety and Show World 23 May (1917), 1.*

### HARRY CLAY'S VAUDEVILLE

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*Everyone's 16 Mar. (1916), 16.*

Last updated: 31/12/2013

This version expanded and updated from Clay Djubal, "What Oh Tonight." Ph D Diss. U of Qld (2005), Appendix D.

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