

CHARLES HOLT

Best known as the founder and leader of The Smart Set Diggers, Charles Holt established the troupe of soldier entertainers in late 1917 while recovering from war injuries in France. He toured the troupe throughout post-war Europe, the UK and then Australia until 1922 before undertaking a tour of the Far East with the Globetrotters. Holt later spent time in New York and reformed the Smart Set Diggers twice in the mid-late 1920s. He was still performing as late as 1930.

1890-1919:

Largely associated with The Smart Set Diggers, Charles Thomas Holt was born in Auckland, New Zealand on 10 July 1892, and after leaving school began working in the drapery business.¹ He immigrated to Australia in his early 20s, settling initially in Sydney and later in Armidale, New South Wales, where he worked for some time as a draper at Richardson's department store.² While in Brisbane in 1915 Holt enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (A.I.F.) as a member of a Divisional Ammunition Park Reinforcement. He was discharged shortly afterwards, however, when the unit was disbanded.³

By July the following year Holt was back in Sydney, and again enlisted in the A.I.F., this time in the Fourth Division, Thirteenth Field Ambulance. Although his military service records at that time indicate his occupation as "theatrical,"⁴ there is little evidence to suggest that he had any stage experience prior to enlisting. An article published in *Aussie: The Australian Soldiers Magazine* in 1918 does indicate that back "in Aussie he used to earn his beer money with the Williamson Comic Opera and the Fuller-Brennan Companies,"⁵ but this association was very likely in the area of costume design or costume-making.



Theatre June (1921), 18.

In late 1917, not long after arriving in France,⁶ Holt was injured in an accident. While recovering in hospital he was instructed by his superiors to put together a concert party with the aim of entertaining troupes operating at or near the front ("Not the Girls, 18).⁷ With no end in sight to the war, the Australian and New Zealand military commands had by this time put in place an edict to resolve the issues of low morale and boredom with their ranks. The first field theatre troupe to be established within the A.I.F. had been the Anzac Coves in late 1916. Originally financed by the Australian Comforts Funds it comprised soldiers from all A.I. F. divisions. The troupe's immediate success led to other concert parties being quickly formed within most A.I.F. Divisions (ctd. Djubal). One of these was Holt's party.⁸

Among the first recruits for the concert party were Fred Whitlow and Ernest Crosby. Both men had also been serving in the 4th Ambulance Division.⁹ As the troupe's leader Holt was given the responsibilities of director and producer in addition to performing as a singer and a female impersonator.¹⁰ Glamorous impersonations of women were relatively commonplace in the variety performances offered by concert troupes during the war – not just by Australian or New Zealand troupes but by British and Canadian ones as well. They were especially prominent in performances by Holt's troupe, which would call itself the Smart Set in 1918 and the Smart Set Diggers from 1920.¹¹ In this respect the Smart Set Diggers had no less than five female impersonators by 1920, the other four being Ralph Sawyer, Fred Whitlow, Bobbi Roberts and Tiki Carpenter.¹² Each of the five impersonators also specialised in different female characters, with Holt's forte being the soft, sweet-voiced singer who performs to the accompaniment of a pianist.

¹ Charles Holt, Birth Certificate, Registration No. 1890/18816, Births, Deaths and Marriages, the Department of Internal Affairs New Zealand."

² "Not The Girls You Think They Are" TT: June (1921), 18;

³ Charles Holt" *Australian Imperial Force. Attestation Paper of Persons Enlisted for Service Abroad*. Upon enlistment Holt registered his occupation as window dresser. NB: All further military details relating to Holt's WWI service are sourced from this document .

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Aussie Field Theatres V." ASE: (1918), 20.

⁶ Holt disembarked from Sydney on 14 June 1917 and left Liverpool (England) for France on 26 August.

⁷ See also: "Smart Set Diggers" STS: 19 Dec. (1920), 22.

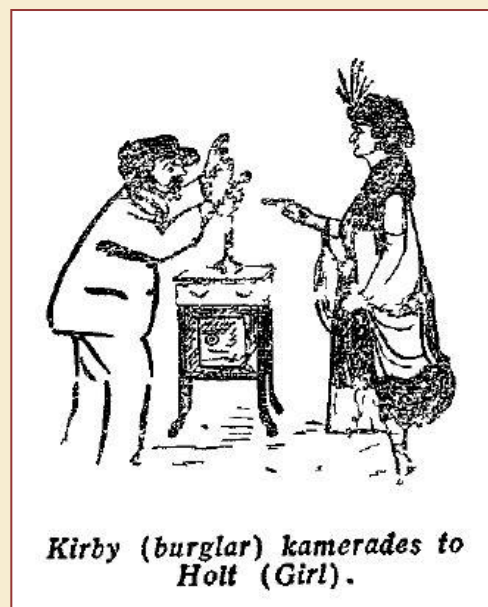
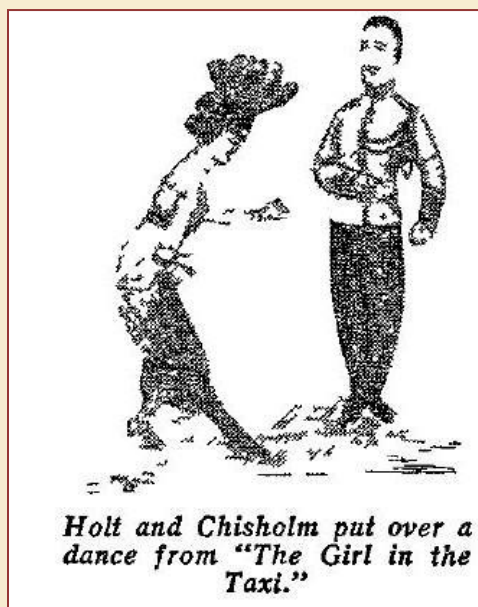
⁸ "Not the Girls." TT: June (1921), 18.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ STS: 19 Dec. (1920), 22.

¹¹ "Smart Set." Program (1918). See also: ARG: 4 May (1920), 12. Advert.

¹² ARG: 4 May (1920), 12.



Aussie: The Australian Soldiers' Magazine Dec. (1918), 20.

In an interview given to the *Theatre Magazine* in 1921, Holt claims that the Smart Set Diggers gave more than a thousand concerts for military personnel before the end of the war, adding that these were often fraught with danger. On one occasion "no less than seventeen audience members were killed outright through a shell striking the structure in which the entertainment was given."¹³

Between May and October 1919, the Smart-Set Diggers toured with the Australian Entertainers Concert Party under the management of Lieutenant E. Warrington, 26th Battalion AIF.¹⁴ Later, under Lieutenant M. Mcphee, they performed for Allied troops awaiting demobilisation, variously appearing in Brussels, Paris, Amiens Rouen, Dieppe, Namur, Dinant, Cherleroi and several other Continental cities.¹⁵ In his 1921 interview with the *Theatre Magazine*, Holt recalls this as an exciting period – particularly for the British leg of this tour when, he said, they performed at Buckingham Palace for the Prince of Wales.¹⁶

3.—Report of College or Firm Lieut E. Warrington, 26th Battalion A.I.F.
Manager & Proprietor
AUSTRALIAN ENTERTAINERS CONCERT PARTY.

Private Holt was a member of the party of Australian soldiers who toured the U.K.
under the management of Lieut Warrington.

As an effort is being made to keep the party together for future work in Australia
the experience gained should materially assist in the venture.

"Record of Non-Military Employment." *Australian Military Forces: Australian Imperial Force*. Nov. 1919, 34.

1920-1928:

In May 1920 the Smart-Set Diggers returned to the Australasian region under contract to J. and N. Tait, playing seasons in Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide before touring New Zealand's Dominion circuit.¹⁷ During this period Holt was often singled out as the troupe's leading lady.¹⁸ New Zealand's *Daily Herald*, for example, describes the other

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ed Warrington (see link below).

¹⁵ "Aussie Diggers" OBS: (1920), 19; "Not the Girls," TT: (1921), 18.

¹⁶ "Not the Girls" TT: (1921), 18.

¹⁷ "Smart Set Diggers: A Fine Programme" DHA: (1921), 6; "Smart Set Diggers: Company" GEPP: (1920), 2; ARG: 4 May 1920, 12; "Second Edition of 'Mdlle. Mimi.'" WNS: (1920), 5.

¹⁸ "Amusements Smart Set Diggers," 10.

four female impersonators as Holt's "lady friends,"¹⁹ while frequent comment was made regarding his dresses. Newspaper advertisements also invariably including the tag-line "Charles Holt's frocks made by La Fayette, Paris."²⁰

After New Zealand the Smart-Set Diggers left J. and N. Tait and began performing under the management of the Fuller's Theatre Company (beginning Jan. 1921).²¹ The first engagement with Fullers' was at the Empire Theatre in Brisbane. They later played a "record season at the Playhouse in Sydney", and returned to Adelaide (Majestic Theatre) before heading back across the Tasman to New Zealand for J. C. Williamsons Ltd.²²



The Theatres, Society and Home, 1 Nov. (1924), 1.

In 1922 Holt and Ralph Sawyer sailed for Java with another variety troupe, the Globetrotters, for a tour of Far East,²³ thereby bringing the Smart Set Diggers to an end. Comprising eight vaudeville entertainers the troupe was led and managed by comedian Richard (Dick) Norton and also featured young Queensland contralto, Florence "Bobby" Broadhurst (she had previously sung at a Smart Set Diggers concert in Toowoomba). Playing to an almost exclusively English/Australian-expatriate audience, the Globetrotters toured through Indonesia, Singapore, Malaya, Thailand, India, Hong Kong, China and Japan until early 1924.²⁴ Holt was often billed anonymously as "? ? ? ?", taking off his wig at the end of his glamorously-dressed impersonations to reveal that he was a man, while Sawyer danced as a woman, including that of Salome (ctd. Fotheringham, "The Globetrotters).

The Smart Set Diggers

Charles Holt, impersonator and producer of the Smart Set Diggers, was once on the Fuller circuit. He joined the 13th F.A. in France, and after a serious illness, became a member of the 4th Div. Smart Set Concert Party as "leading lady" and producer. After the Armistice he joined the Australian Army Entertainers as producer and impersonator, and toured the British Isles for 10 months with success. Mr. Holt played in Paris, Rouen and Brussels, and had the pleasure of meeting the late Gaby Deslys, who presented him with one of her famous hats—it is worn in the opening scene of the present show. His gowns are creations from La Fayette, Paris.



CHARLES HOLT.

Sunday Times 19 Dec. (1920), 22.

Following the conclusion of their Globetrotters contract Holt and Sawyer returned to Australia and immediately set about reforming the Smart-Set Diggers²⁵ for a tour of New South Wales and Queensland. Although they possibly made their return debut in Sydney at Leichhardt's Strand Theatre, the first established performance was at the Oddfellow's Hall, Kiama (NSW) on 24 October.²⁶ Not surprisingly the troupe's publicity talked up Holt's international appearances, noting that he had "just returned from a world's tour of the Orient."²⁷ Holt's frocks were once again a highlight. One article describes him as the star of the show due to the exquisite finery of his Parisian dresses. These were reportedly insured for no less than one thousand pounds.²⁸

¹⁹ "Smart Set Diggers, The" BWMG: (1920), 2.

²⁰ GEPP: 4 May 1920, 3 Advert; STS: 19 Dec. (1920), 22.

²¹ "Smart Set Diggers, The" BC: (1921), 11.

²² "Majestic Theatre" AA: (1921), 7; "His Majesty's Theatre" EP: (1921), 3.

²³ "Charles Holt" TT: (1921), 1.

²⁴ Djubal, Clay "Smart Set" *AustLit*; "Charles Holt" TT: (1921), 1.

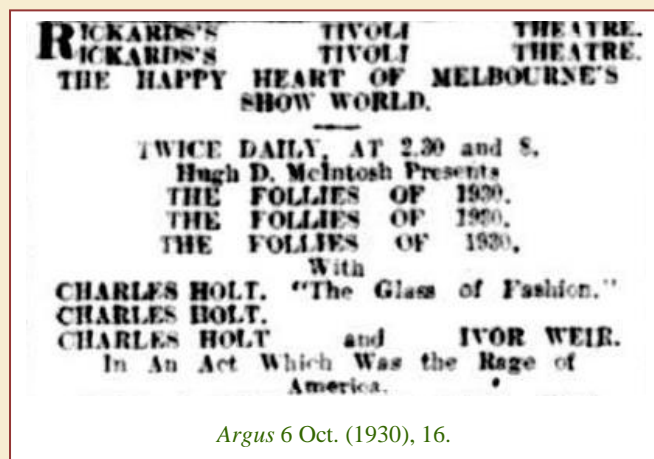
²⁵ "Concerts, Dances" KRIJ: (1924), 2.

²⁶ Djubal, Clay. "Smart Set" AVTA: (2011), 6; "Concerts, Dances" KRIJ: (1924), 2.

²⁷ "Concerts, Dances" KRIJ: (1924), 2; "New Shaftsbury" STP: (1924), 6; "Smart Set" STP: (1924), 6; "Smart Set" MB: (1925), 5.

²⁸ "Entertainments: Martoo's" QT: (1925), 9; MB: 23 April 1925, 2. Advert.

From October 1924 till June 1925, the Smart Set Diggers toured across the two states, performing at Sydney's Lyric Wintergarden, Newcastle's Strand Theatre, Brisbane's Elite Theatre and Townsville's Stanley Theatre among other regional theatres.²⁹ By October 1925, Holt had once again returned to the United States, this time with fellow female impersonator and friend, Fred Whitlow. After disembarking in San Francisco the pair travelled across North America for New York City. Holt appears to have spent around three years working in the city, including the Broadway district. Over the next three years Australian newspapers occasionally reported on his theatrical efforts in the city and on his return to Australia in 1929, at which time he again revived the Smart Set Diggers, this experience became publicity fodder. "They ought to be good," wrote a journalist for Perth's *Mirror*. "For instance, there's Charles Holt, who had four years where Broadway's lights blaze brightly."³⁰ He'd been there for so long one paper even mistakenly referred to him as an "American."³¹



Between December 1929 and mid 1930, Holt toured Australia with the reassembled Smart-Set Diggers.³² By this time the troupe included several female performers, possibly a sign that female impersonation was waning on the vaudeville stage. The Smart Set Diggers appear to have disbanded for good by June 1930, but Holt continued to perform his female impersonation act with Harry Rickards' Tivoli Follies until at least October that year.³³ When he first appeared at the Tivoli in September, Holt received top billing. In a feature article appearing in the *Argus*, he was described as "an excellent actor and an artist in makeup."³⁴ The article goes on to note that Holt "would never had made a female impersonator in those Victorian days when muscle was the prerogative of mere man, but in these times his physical development does

not appear out of place".³⁵ Perhaps signalling an increasing insecurity about masculinity in Australian popular entertainment – Holt's act was modified to include another woman in a more pantomime-based "sister act" sketch by the 13th of October 1930.³⁶ Within the next few weeks he would fall further down the bill until his name was simply listed at the bottom.³⁷

No further information has yet been located regarding Holt following that final newspaper advertisement on 19 October 1930. It is possible that he continued on to work in the suburban and regional centres, as so many did during the Depression. It is also possible he changed his professional name and and/or his profession. Whatever the reason, the draper-turned-servicemen was no longer a much-admired "leading lady" on the Australian. The last records available on Holt relate to his service during World War II (*Second Australian Imperial Force Personnel Dossiers, 1939-1947*).

SEE ALSO

- [The Smart Set Diggers](#)
- [The Globetrotters](#)
- [Ed Warrington](#)

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

- Holt's mother's name was Mary Ellen Bull. At the time of his enlistment in 1916 she was living in Thames, New Zealand.
- An advertisement for Carroll's Continentals in the *Queensland Times* (16 Dec. 1912, 6) records one of the feature artists as "Chas. Holt, The Eminent Descriptive Vocalist." It is unlikely that he was the Charles Holt who is the subject of this biography.

²⁹ "Smart Set" CESM: (1925), 4; "Smart Set" BC: (1925), 9; TDB: 23 June (1925), 3. Advert; "Smart Set" BMEK: (1925), 5.

³⁰ "Smart Set Diggers: Parade" MRP: (1929), 10.

³¹ "Luxor Theatre" STP: (1929), 8.

³² Ibid.

³³ Djubal, Clay. "Smart Set Diggers" AVTA: (2011), 7.

³⁴ "Tivoli 'Follies" ARG: (1930), 12.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ "'Sparkles' at the Tivoli" ARG: (1930), 11.

³⁷ "Melbourne Theatres" SM: (1930), 13.

FURTHER REFERENCE

- "[Amusements: Smart Set Diggers](#)." RA: 14 July (1920), 10.
"[Amusements: Smart Set Diggers](#)." MB: 23 Apr. (1925), 5.
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Fotheringham, Richard. "[The Globetrotters](#)." AVTA: (2011).
"[Luxor Theatre: A Company Coming](#)." STP: 15 Dec. (1929), 8.
"[Majestic Theatre](#)." AA: 9 Mar. (1921), 7.
"[New Shaftsbury Theatre](#)." STP: 7 Dec. (1924), 6.
"Not The Girls You Think They Are." TT: June (1921), 18.
"[Second Edition of 'Mdle. Mimi](#)." WNS: 8 May (1920), 5.
"[Smart Set Diggers](#)." BC: 13 Apr. (1925), 9.
"[Smart Set Diggers](#)." CESM: 10 Mar. (1925), 4.
"[Smart Set Diggers, The](#)." BWMG: 23 July (1920), 2.
"Smart Set." Program. 24 June 1918. Concert and Theatre Collections Program, File 1: Formation Headquarters (1915-1919). *Australian War Memorial*. PUBS002/004/001/001/018.
"[Smart Set Diggers, The](#)." BC: 19 Jan. (1921), 11.
"[Smart Set Diggers: A Fine Programme](#)." DHA: 19 July (1920), 6.
"[Smart Set Diggers: Company of Entertainers](#)." GEPP: 4 May (1920), 2.
"[Smart Set Diggers: Opening at the Palais, The](#)." BMEK: 16 Jan. (1925), 5.
"[Smart Set Diggers: Parade at the Luxor](#)." MRP: 14 Dec. (1929), 10.
"[Sparkles' at the Tivoli](#)." ARG: 13 Oct. (1930), 11.
"[Tivoli 'Follies': Varied Bill of Fare](#)." ARG: 29 Sept (1930), 12.

See also:

- ARG: [4 May \(1920\), 12](#). Advert.
EP: 2 Nov. (1921), 3.
GEPP: [4 May \(1920\), 3](#). Advert.
KRIJ: [15 Oct. \(1924\), 2](#).
MB: 23 Apr. (1925), 2. Advert.
OBS: 25 Sept. (1920), 19.
SM: 19 Oct. (1930), 13. ["Melbourne Theatres"]
TDB: 23 June (1925), 3.

LUXOR THEATRE
RE-OPENS
The Smartest Entertainment
in Perth
NEXT SATURDAY
Commencing at the Matinee.
THE SMART SET DIGGERS.
THE SMART SET DIGGERS.
THE SMART SET DIGGERS.
— The —
Most Discussed Vaudeville
Company in Australia
Specially featuring
CHARLES HOLT
(Four years on Broadway).
TIKI CARPENTER, The Male "Pav-
lova."
EDDIE HILL TOMMY LEWOLA
LINDSAY KEMBLE, Original Digger
Concert Party.
FRED ASHTON, "The Man with the
'Melba' Voice."
BEULAH BENSON, "A Real Live
Wire."
AND OTHERS.
**The Biggest Company That
Has Ever Been Seen At**

Mirror (Perth) 14 Dec. (1929), 10.

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