

INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS: F

W.C. FIELDS

Mozetto at the Shaftesbury is described as "Cinquevalli's only rival." The truth is that Cinqy never had a rival unless it be W.C. Fields.¹

[1903, 1914] A gifted juggler with a caustic wit and a mastery of the euphemism, William Claude Dukenfield, better known as W.C. Fields, is regarded not only as a brilliant juggler but also as a Broadway revue star, a popular radio performer and a film actor whose career straddled both the silent and talkie eras. In these films, many of which survive, Fields managed to introduce most of the routines from his early career, and as such is one of the very few vaudevillians to have his performances preserved for posterity.

Born in Philadelphia on 9 April 1879, Fields became fascinated with juggling during his youth and by 1896 had made his professional debut at a beer hall in Atlantic City. He went on to tour various US vaudeville circuits before joining the Irwin Burlesquers in 1899. While with that company he met and married chorus girl Hattie Hughes. She worked as his stage partner until they separated in 1904. During that time Fields established himself as an eccentric tramp juggler, having introduced a comedic element to his act. He undertook his first international tour in 1901, finding much success in Europe, England, South Africa and Australia. By 1904 he had expanded his repertoire to include his famous pool table absurdity, a routine which saw him able to pocket up to 15 balls with one shot. What really set Fields apart from his peers, however, was his almost complete silence - his routines being carried out as if he was alone.

In 1915 Fields moved from vaudeville to revue, making his first appearance on Broadway in one of the Ziegfeld Follies. He also made two short films that same year - *Pool Sharks* and *His Lordship's Dilemma*. His career as a Hollywood film star began in earnest in 1925 - the year after he had made a cameo appearance in *Janice Meredith* (starring Marion Davies). Field's first feature as a lead actor was *Sally of the Sawdust*. He followed this with almost forty more films, and is also credited as writer on 22. His first talkie was *The Golf Specialist*.



Source: www.explorepahistory.com

**FIRST APPEARANCE IN AUSTRALIA
TO-NIGHT (SATURDAY), TO-NIGHT,
Another
NEW, NOVEL, and STAR ARTIST,
Mr.
W. C. FIELDS,
America's Eccentric Juggler.**

Argus (Melbourne) 13 June 1903, 20.

Fields' legendary drinking (which is said to have included two quarts of gin, plus wine and whisky on a daily basis) led to his declining health in the 1940s. Although he made his last film in 1941, his unmistakable voice continued to be heard on radio up until his death on Christmas Day 1946.

Australia saw Fields appear on its vaudeville stages in 1903 and again in 1914,² the first tour undertaken for [Harry Rickards](#) and the second for [Hugh D. McIntosh](#) ([Harry Rickards Tivoli Theatres Ltd](#)). After sailing from San Francisco in late April he arrived in Australia on 7 June and made his debut at the Melbourne [Opera House](#) six nights later. His performance was an immediate hit with both audiences and critics alike. The *Argus* critic, echoing most other reviews, was glowing in his or her review of the juggler's opening performance:

Mr. W.C. Fields, the other new arrival, set before the audience one of the most diverting turns that has been seen for many a day. Mr. Fields terms himself America's eccentric juggler, and eccentric he is. Expecting that he would prove merely one of the many weak imitators of Cinquevalli, the audience, at the outset, was preparing itself to despise Mr. Fields, but he was on the stage only a very few seconds when it changed its mind. There was no

¹ "The Busker: Grease Paint Patter, Burnt Cork Chronicles." *Sunday Times* (Perth) 15 Dec. 1912, 17.

² Fields did not play any engagements in New Zealand in 1903.

straining after effect, no self-consciousness. Mr. Fields is an instinctive humorist, and he acts as though he was in a room by himself. Further, as a juggler, he excites no comparisons with others of the same profession. His juggling is performed with balls, hats, sticks, and the usual paraphernalia of the craft, but there the resemblance ends. He puts these articles to such strange uses and comports himself in such a way, that he conjures up no recollections of jugglers who have preceded him. He is silent through the whole of his turn, except when he makes a mistake. His deep and fervent comment on such occasions provokes such laughter that one is set wondering whether the error was not intentional. Altogether, Mr. Fields succeeded in presenting a highly amusing turn of a distinctly original type (16 June 1903, 6).

After the Melbourne season ended on 9 July Fields played Adelaide ([Tivoli Theatre](#), 11-22 July) and Sydney ([Tivoli](#), 25 July-1 Oct.) before undertaking his farewell shows back in Melbourne (5 Oct.-6 Nov.). He and his wife then left Australia for engagements in South Africa.

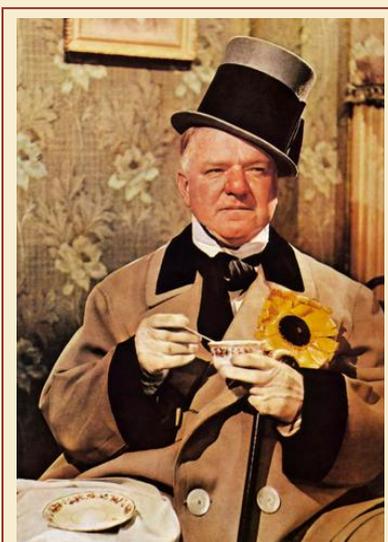
Fields' return to Australia in 1914 saw him make one of his final tours as a fulltime professional vaudeville artist - his career from 1915 onwards being largely undertaken in the area of revues/follies and films. After arriving in the country in late May he opened his account in Sydney at the Tivoli on 4 April running through until 9 May.³ He then played the Melbourne [Tivoli](#) (16 May-11 June), followed by Adelaide (13 June-3 July). Brief farewell seasons were then undertaken in all three capitals beginning with Sydney (6-11 July), then Melbourne (15-24 July) and finally Adelaide (15 July-6 Aug.). He played his final Australian engagements at the Perth Tivoli between 11 and 17 August.

During the 1914 tour, which saw Fields present turns lasting up to half an hour, the *Adelaide Mail* published a critique of his performances. Written by Sam Snow the article begins with the suggestion that the "golf fiend" was not such a fool as he looked on the stage:

Every move, every action, conveys the impression that he is, as the Scotch put it, "the safest of the family." To the average Australian he appears to be "up the pole." He's not a bit annoyed at this. He's pleased. It took him many years to cultivate that sublimely ridiculous look, and to him it has been worth thousands of pounds. If it required silly looks alone to turn in a big income we all know dozens of people who would now be independent. But Mr. Fields does more than look silly. He acts silly. This in itself is an art which has made men famous all over the world. With all his silliness, however, Mr. Fields also brings into use in his turn skill as a juggler that would enable another man to earn as much money as a Prime Minister. So taking him all round the "Silent Humourist" as he is known, with his quaint looks, his peculiar actions, and his ability puts on a turn that is hard to beat (13 June 1914, 18).



Further Reference: Much has been written on Fields both during his career and since his death. The following comprises a selection of these publications, both in print and online. A selection of [W.C. Fields](#) clips can also be accessed via [YouTube](#).



W. C. Fields in later years
www.doctormacro.com

Anobile, Richard J. *Drat! Being the Encapsulated View of Life by W.C. Fields in His Own Words*. New York: New American Library, 1968.

Everson, William K. *The Art of W.C. Fields*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967.

Fields, Ronald J, ed. *W.C. Fields by Himself*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973.

Gehring, Wes D. *W.C. Fields: A Bio-Bibliography*. Westport, Ct: Greenwood Press, 1984.

"Opera House: New Artists." *Argus* (Melbourne) 15 June 1903, 6.

Slide, Anthony. *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*. 1994, 176-79.

"Stars of Vaudeville #111: W.C. Fields." *Travalanche*. [sighted 18/07/2014]

Snow, Sam. "W.C. Fields: The Golf Fiend." *Mail* (Adelaide) 13 June 1914, 18.

"Those Who Will Not Laugh: Some Reminiscences of W.C. Fields." *Sunday Times* (Sydney) 26 Apr. 1914, 22.

"W.C. Fields." *Internet Movie Database*. [sighted 27/07/2014]

"W.C. Fields Historical Marker." *Explore PA History* [sighted 27/07/2014]

"World's Greatest Silent Humourist." *Mail* (Adelaide) 6 June 1914, 22.

Yanni, Nicholas. *W.C. Fields*. New York: Pyramid, 1974.

³ For this tour he was accompanied by his brother, Walter.



A few impressions of W. C. Fields performing.
The Mail (Adelaide) 6 June 1914, 12.

000

FOUR COMICAL CARDS

aka **The Sisters Phillips** [1] and the **Brothers Lorenzi**

(Aust: 1898-99) English danseuses and acrobats. [Frank Elton, William Knight, Rose Phillips and Lillian Hales]

After making their debut in the early 1880s, the Sisters Phillips joined forces with the Lorenzi Brothers (acrobats) sometime around 1885.⁴ According to Elton and Knight their decision to combine the two acts was made in order to provide something more distinctive than a plain acrobatic turn. After making their debut together at Birmingham's Gaiety Theatre the quartet spent the next 14 years touring throughout the English provinces interspersed with seasons at some of London's leading music halls. They also toured throughout much Europe, reportedly playing such countries as Russia, Spain, France, Holland and Germany. Once during an engagement in Egypt they even played before the Viceroy.⁵

In 1898 Elton, Knight, Phillips and Hales signed with [Harry Rickards](#) for an eight months tour of Australia. Arriving in Sydney in late November as the "Famous Four Comical Cards," the quartet made their debut at the Sydney [Tivoli](#) on the 26th, and received enthusiastic recalls at the end of their turn. The *Evening News* theatre critic wrote of their opening night performance:

TIVOLI THEATRE.

: SPECIAL PRELIMINARY ANNOUNCEMENT.

Arriving direct from LONDON per R.M.S.S. ORIENT.
 To make their First Appearance in Australia at the
 Tivoli Theatre

**NEXT SATURDAY AFTERNOON and
 EVENING, NOVEMBER 26th.**

**THE SISTERS PHILLIPS
 AND
 BROTHERS LORENZI,**

THE FAMOUS FOUR COMICAL CARDS.
 They will make their first appearance in their own cele-
 brated sketch, the Witty, Whimsical, Pantomimical
 "COOK'S BIRTHDAY."
 Special Scenery, Properties, Music, and Effects.

Sydney Morning Herald 22 Nov. 1898, 2.

⁴ In an interview with the *Referee* newspaper (7 Dec. 1898, 10), the Brothers Lorenzi indicate that they joined forces with the Sisters Phillips in 1890. However, research undertaken by Brian Chatters (a distant cousin to William Knight) has uncovered advertisements and articles that show the foursome having been together as early as 1885.

⁵ "Theatrical Talks: The Phillip Sisters and Lorenzi Brothers." *Referee* (Sydney) 7 Dec. 1898, 10.

The Sisters Phillips and Brothers Lorenzi made their first bow to a Sydney audience and created a more than favourable impression. Their pantomime skit ["Cook's Birthday"] was decidedly clever and original. The Sisters Phillips are able dancers, and their colleagues are responsible for some humorous acrobatic performances introduced into a stage duel. The quartette... are already established favourites.⁶

In an interview published in Sydney's *Referee* newspaper two weeks later the four performers gave some insight into the popularity they had garnered by then, claiming that in the three years leading up to their departure from England they had had only three weeks break. They also noted that after concluding their Australian tour they were set to return to England where they were already booked for an English provincial tour. This was to be followed a pantomime engagement at Sheffield's Opera House (their sixth) over the Christmas/New Year. 1900 would also see them return to Birmingham's Prince of Wales Theatre, while the management at Leeds Grand Theatre had booked them for 1901.⁷



Sisters Phillips
Referee (Sydney) 7 Dec. 1898, 10.

The quartet remained in Sydney until 3 February presenting "boisterous" sketches such as "In a Terrible Storm" and by popular demand repeat performances of "Cook's Birthday." Other turns presented during the Australian tour included "Sister Susan's Baby," "We're Reforming 'Em," and "Big Army." The Sisters Phillips also worked in a variety of dance styles, including [clog dancing](#).⁸ The quartet's billing had also by January begun to position "Four Comical Cards" as more of a descriptive, with Sisters Phillips and Brothers Lorenzi being favoured as the name of the act.

After concluding their Sydney season on the Friday night they travelled directly to Melbourne where the following night they headlined Rickards' first show in the [Bijou Theatre](#).⁹ *Table Talk's* theatre critic wrote of their Melbourne debut:

The new pantomime artists the Sisters Phillips and the Brothers Lorenzi prove the most rollicking, reckless quartette that Mr Rickards has engaged. Cook's Birthday their comic sketch is crammed with laughable antics, topical hits and all sorts of vagaries expected and unexpected. To look at the performance one would think their whole lives were spent in devising some comic absurdity¹⁰

The *Australasian's* critic was similarly impressed:

A quartet of pantomime artists, the Sisters Phillips and Brothers Lorenzi, made their first bows in Melbourne and turned out to be unusually clever acrobats with comical effects. In olden times the acrobat was a saturnine person who contorted himself in sullen silence with apparent contempt for all who came to see him. Nowadays he is a cheerful person who 'patters' constantly, and even indulges in a species of dramatic performance. The sketch, entitled 'The Cook's Birthday' [sic] evoked much applause.¹¹

⁶ "Amusements: Tivoli." *Evening News* (Sydney) 5 Dec. 1898, 8

⁷ "Theatrical Talks." *ibid.*

⁸ See "Dance" section.

⁹ Rickards had ended his association with the Opera House the previous night.

¹⁰ "On and Off the Stage." *Table Talk* (Melbourne) 11 Feb. 1899, 17.

¹¹ "Entertainments: Theatres etc." *Australasian* (Melbourne) 11 Feb. 1899, 35.

CREMORNE THEATRE.

Enormous Success of
JONES and LAWRENCE'S VAUDEVILLE
COMPANY.

Headed by that Great English Artiste,
Miss PEGGY PRYDE } Created a Sensation.
Miss PEGGY PRYDE } A Perfect Furore.
Miss PEGGY PRYDE }
House Crowded to the Doors, Audience Con-
vulsed at the Antics of the

The Monarchs of Mirth, { LORENZI BROS.
LORENZI BROS.
LORENZI BROS.

And the Charming
SISTERS PHILLIPS } Models of Grace
SISTERS PHILLIPS } and Vivacity.
SISTERS PHILLIPS }
SISTERS PHILLIPS }

GRAND CHANGE NEXT SATURDAY.
Miss PEGGY PRIDE.

Will introduce the following new
Specialities:

{ "Lodgiu' Our Slavey."
"Italiano Sarah."
"Mag Dashaway," and
"Southend on Sea." }

And the LORENZI BROS.,

The Famous Comical Cards,
And SISTERS PHILLIPS,
In their own famous sketch, the witty, whim-
sical, pantomimical, primogenical
COOK'S BIRTHDAY.

Universally acknowledged to be the funniest
pantomime absurdity of the day. Special
scenery, properties, music and effects.

Supported by the full strength of
JONES and LAWRENCE'S VAUDEVILLE
COMPANY.

West Australian (Perth) 21 July 1899, 1.

The foursome returned to Sydney on 2 April, remaining there until the end of May. They then played another season in Melbourne beginning 3 June. In the meantime Harry Rickards had arranged to lease the act to Western Australian entrepreneurs [George A. Jones](#) and [George Lawrence](#) for a brief engagement on their way home to England. Following the conclusion of their Melbourne season the Sisters Phillips and Brothers Lorenzi sailed for Fremantle where they opened for one night at the Town Hall (3 July). This was followed by a short tour of the goldfields beginning with Coolgardie on the 5th. After playing shows in Kalgoorlie, Kanowna and Boulder they returned to Perth, beginning an 11 nights season at Jones and Lawrence's [Cremorne Theatre](#) from the 15th.

The Four Comical Cards made their final Australian appearance on 28 July. They sailed from Albany for England on the R.M.S. Ormuz two days later. Although it was announced in October that Harry Rickards had re-engaged the act for a 12 months return engagement in the near future, this does not appear to have eventuated. In correspondence with the Australian Variety Theatre Archive, Brian Chatters indicates that the act was still together as late as 1905.

Historical Notes:

1. Rose Phillips and Frank Elton were husband and wife. Brian Chatters notes that Rose is officially recorded as a widow in 1911 (Frank's death date is yet to be confirmed).
2. The Sisters Phillips act should not be confused with two similarly named Australian acts - the [Sisters Phillips](#) [2] (Ethel and Hilda Phillip) and the [Phillips Sisters](#) (Eileen and Bessie Phillips).

Thanks to Brian Chatters for additional information and corrections.

000