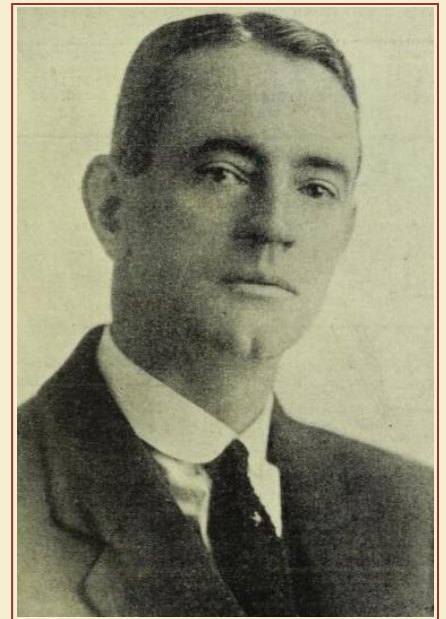


CLAUDE E. WEBB

Claude Webb became involved in the entertainment industry at age 17 as treasurer for the Lynch Family of Bellringers and was later employed as an advance rep by Alfred Dampier and Charles Holloway before touring America with Olga Nethersole. After returning home he was associated with Harry Clay (1909), J.C. Williamson's, George Willoughby, and C.E. King (both 1914), then moved into film exhibition as a manager for Union Theatres. His involvement with variety theatre was largely via his own touring company (1905) and later through Union Theatres Vaudeville, which was established in 1925 in order to supplement the company's film programmes. Prior to the arrival of "talkies," Webb also engaged between-films singers and actor/entertainers (for cinematic prologues), and in the early 1930s acted as a representative for the Australian Broadcasting Company. Webb left the Greater Union organisation in 1941 to take over a cinema in Strathalbyn, South Australia.

Considered one of Australia's best-known and most respected advance reps and cinema showmen of the early twentieth century, Claude E. Webb was born and raised in Launceston Tasmania. His parents Mr and Mrs F. Webb have been identified as long time residents of that city. Their son started his career in the entertainment industry sometime around 1900/1901 as treasurer for the Lynch Family of Bellringers. He was reportedly aged on seventeen when he took on the position. Three years later actor/manager [Alfred Dampier](#) employed him as the advance rep for his dramatic company (1903-1905). Webb then briefly worked in a similar position with Charles Holloway (1905).



Everyone's (Sydney) 1 Sept. 1926, 3.

Mount Barker Institute.
WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 4.
 The FAMOUS, ORIGINAL, and ONLY
Lynch Family Bellringers,
 Glassophonists, and Vocalists
 (Organised 1857) and their NEW
ENGLISH SPECIALTY COMPANY
 From the principal Halls of Great Britain.
NEW AND ATTRACTIVE PROGRAM.
 Popular Prices. Door open 7.30; Overture at 8.
WOODSIDE, THURSDAY, SEPT. 5.
 LYNCH BROS., Proprietors. CLAUDE E. WEBB, Agent.

Earliest known advert featuring Webb's name.
Mount Barker Courier and Onkaparinga and Gumeracha Advertiser (SA) 30 Aug. 1901, 2.

1905 also saw Webb take his own theatrical operation - billed as the Anglo-Australian Bioscope and Concert Company - to Tasmania. The artists engaged were "Wolfe, the Wonderful" (aka "the monarch of mystery"), Belle Sprott (singer), Brander Balfour (baritone), Stanley Lewis (society entertainer), and Ethel Hampton (soprano).

Although Webb's name disappears from Australian newspapers between November 1905 and April 1908, he is known to have spent much of this time touring the USA as Olga Nethersole's manager. In an extended article published in *Everyone's* in 1926, Webb recalls being in San Francisco at the time of the 1906 earthquake and as with all the other members of the company not only lost everything but also "suffered great privation until communication to the outer world was established."¹ He soon afterwards took a leave of absence from the company to travel some 1200 miles through Alaska and the Yukon with a team of fur buyers.

On returning to Australia Webb again found employment as tour manager, advance rep and company manager. Between 4 September and early November 1909 he oversaw [Walter Bentley's](#) tour of Queensland for [Harry Clay](#), and followed that engagement with another Queensland tour, this time for Edwin Geach. Over the next five years Webb alternated regional (and occasional capital city) engagements with dramatic and comedy companies organised by Geach, Rupert Clarke and Clyde Meynell, [George Willoughby](#), [J.C. Williamson's](#), C.E. King, and the Fred Graham Comedy Company (New Zealand, 1911). His involvement with those various operations saw him travelled widely through Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania. On several occasions these companies operated under joint management - as with the Clarke, Meynell and Willoughby tour of Western Australia (1911) and J.C. Williamson/Clarke and Meynell's touring production of *The Woman in the Case* (1911/1912) - the latter with [George Willoughby](#) as director.

HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE.

Under the direction of Mr. HARRY CLAY.
 LESSEE, HAROLD ASHTON.

COMMENCING SATURDAY, 4th SEPTEMBER.
 WELCOME RETURN VISIT OF THE WORLD RENOWNED TRAGEDIAN,
Walter Bentley. Walter Bentley.
Walter Bentley. Walter Bentley.

Who has toured America and the United Kingdom since leaving Brisbane, taking his recognized place on the stage as
One of the Greatest Actors of the World.

During his brief visit Mr. Bentley will be seen in some of his greatest creations. The season will begin with Shakespeare's Sublime Tragedy,
HAMLET.

HAMLET, PRINCE OF DENMARK WALTER BENTLEY.
 Produced a few weeks ago in Sydney, it packed the Criterion Theatre to the doors night after night for two weeks.
 Mr. Bentley will be supported by MISS **ESSIE CLAY** and a Powerful Dramatic Company.

POPULAR PRICES: 3/, 2/, 1/. No early doors. Box plan now open at Paling's. Day sales at Black's, Tobacconist's.

CLAUDE E. WEBB.

Telegraph (Brisbane) 2 Sept. 1909, 8.

¹ "Claude Webb," 3.

Claude Webb's other engagements during this period were with Cremer and Worger (Brisbane 1912/1913) and Walter Bentley (1913 "farewell to the stage" tour).² His longest stay in any one location appears to have been a 12 month engagement with C.E. King at Brisbane's [Theatre Royal](#). The season of melodrama staged under the auspices of King's Royal Dramatic Company (but under Webb's management) lasted from 24 May 1913 until April 1914. By July that year he was back with George Willoughby.

Although few details regarding Claude Webb's life and career between mid-1914 and the early-1920s have been located to date, it appears that he made the move from live theatre to film theatre management sometime between July 1914 and the end of 1915. He is believed to have started this new career phase at Sydney's Lyric Theatre, then under the control of [Union Theatres](#) (although advertising still identified it as being part of the Greater J.D. Williams Amusement Company's operations).³ A report published in the *Examiner* (Launceston) in early December 1915 provides some evidence in relation to his early career in film theatre management:

Claude E. Webb, who visited Tasmania some years since as business representative for several prominent dramatic organisations, notably *The Woman in the Case*, and *A Fool There Was*, is now manager of one of the biggest picture theatres in the world - the Lyric, George-street, Sydney.⁴

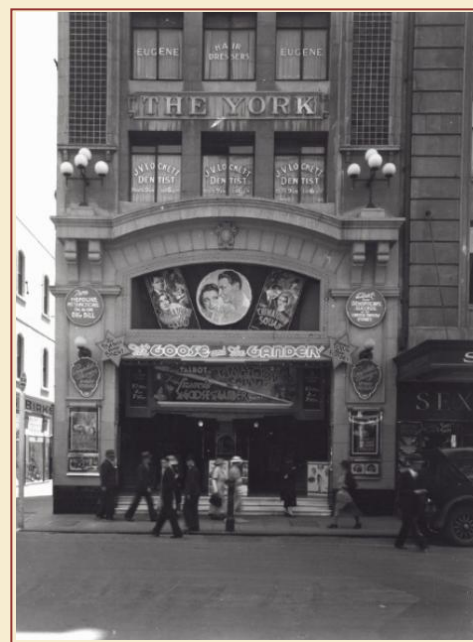
Webb was to remain a senior manager with Union Theatres/Greater Union until 1941.

In late-1916 Union Theatres' directors transferred Webb from Sydney to Adelaide so that he could take over the management of the Pavilion Pictures (known locally as Pav Pictures). This move may well have been a response to the venue's former manager, Matthew Fawcner and ticket seller William Ratcliffe having being charged earlier in the year with conspiracy to defraud the company. The case broke publically in April, and the two men were committed for trial in May. At court Ratcliffe pleaded guilty, and was later sentenced to 12 months hard labour. Although Fawcner was found not guilty by the jury, his name has not been linked to either "the Pav" or to Union Theatres again. It is likely that one or more temporary managers oversaw the running of the venue until Webb was offered the permanent position of General Manager.⁵

Webb remained at the helm of the Pav until May 1921, at which time he was temporarily relocated to Launceston. The move also saw him promoted to the position of Tasmanian general manager. Although he was supposed to also oversee the company's film exhibition in Hobart at some later stage, Webb was recalled to Adelaide in October to take control of the company's newly built York Theatre. In all he stayed only five months in Tasmania, with most of that period being spent as manager of Launceston's Princess Theatre.

Adelaide's York Theatre opened on 3 November 1921 and Webb remained at its helm until 1929. As the superintending manager of South Australia for Union Theatres he had the additional responsibilities of looking after West's Theatre and (briefly) the Wondergraph.⁶ In its reports on the York's first and second birthday celebrations, Adelaide's *Register* made special mention of Webb's role in its success:

1922: The 'baby' in Adelaide's pictorial theatre world - The York - will on Saturday celebrate the first anniversary of its establishment. That magnificent building, which occupies one of the chief vantage points of the city, has made remarkable progress under the able direction of Mr. Claude E. Webb. Mr. Webb has had wide experience in the theatrical world..... The first prologues in Adelaide's cinema theatres were given at the York, as well as special limelight effects.



The York Theatre, Adelaide ca. 1935/36.
Located at 66 Rundle Street it was demolished in the 1960s to make way for the widening of Gawler Place.

Source: Cinema Treasure.

² Seasons included Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne between February and March.

³ In 1912 West's Pictures, Spencer's Pictures and Amalgamated Pictures joined forces to form the General Film Company of Australasia. When that company merged with the Greater J.D. Williams Amusement Co in 1913 it was restructured and renamed Union Theatres and Australasian Films (aka the Combine). That company, which became better known simply as Union Theatres, struggled during the Depression years and was eventually liquidated in 1931. Its assets were purchased by the newly formed Greater Union Theatres.

⁴ "About People." *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas) 3 Dec. 1915, 6.

⁵ Senior Union Theatres' manager W. Barrington Miller may have possibly overseen the Pav at some stage.

⁶ The Wondergraph theatre was taken over by Union Theatres in December 1928, but still operated publically under the business name Greater Wondergraph Company Ltd. It officially became part of Union Theatres (South Australia) in late-1929 when that company was legally registered. For further details see; "Trade and Finance." *News* (Adelaide) 29 Nov. 1929, 16.

1923: The- power behind the pictorial throne - Mr. Claude E. Webb - should feel proud of a splendid achievement with regard to the York Theatre.... [and] most of the success attained by this newcomer into the movie world is due to [his] energy, ability, far-sightedness, tact, and consistent courtesy.... [Mr Webb] is one of the most popular of the managerial members of the profession, and is the fortunate possessor of a bright and breezy personality. He supervised the erection of the York [Theatre] with great care, and has since then bestowed the same thought upon the welfare and comfort of his patrons..... By the discerning use of musical prologues, specially costumed in typical settings, and by big artistic lobby displays, Mr. Webb has further attracted the public. It has been said that picture-managers are born not made and, in the case of the York supervisor, this holds good. He has spent years connected with theatrical enterprises in all parts of the globe, and has gradually assimilated that enviable knowledge, how to keep closely in touch with public favour, and thus keep the theatre in the limelight.⁷



News (Adelaide) 2 Nov. 1927, 15.

In 1929 Webb was again transferred by Union Theatres, this time to Newcastle, New South Wales where he managed the Strand Theatre. In May the following year he was reported to have taken charge of the Lyrics Theatre as well. The *Newcastle Morning Herald* records in 1930, too, that in addition to being Union Theatre's Superintending Manager for Newcastle, Webb also held the position of representative for the Australian Broadcasting Company. In this role he helped produce the opening programme for local radio station 2NC on 19 December 1930.⁸

Webb returned to Adelaide in mid-1932, replacing Fred Chivers (who was in turn transferred to Sydney). Although once again in charge of South Australian circuit (this time for the newly formed Greater Union company), his headquarters were relocated to West's Theatre. The following year Webb severed his employment with Greater Union, taking up an offer from Associated British Cinema Ltd to act as general manger for its South Australian operations. Interestingly he retained West's Theatre as his headquarters, with the popular venue having been acquired by the company.⁹ Webb's time with British Cinema was short-lived, however. The formation of the General Theatres Corporation in early 1933 (the result of the merger between Greater Union and Hoyts), and its subsequent amalgamation with Fullers' Theatres only days later, brought about unprecedented changes to the local film exhibition landscape. One of these changes was the closure of West's Theatre in February 1934.¹⁰ West's film contracts were simply transferred to the nearby York Theatre, which also saw the return of Webb as superintending manager for Greater Union, South Australia.

Claude E. Webb
News (Adelaide) 20 May 1935, 3.



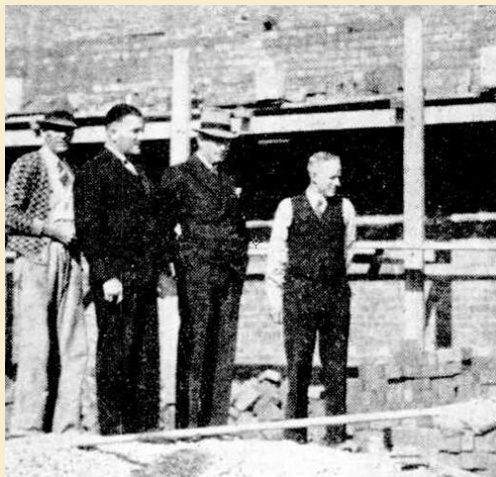
⁷ "Managerial Triumph." 11.

⁸ "Broadcasting: Opening of 2NC - Programme Announced." *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* (NSW) 18 Dec. 1930, 3. NB: The Australian Broadcasting Company should not be confused with the Australian Broadcasting Commission, which was established in 1932 (and is now known as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation).

⁹ British Cinema films were sourced from exhibitors such as British Empire Films, British International Pictures, Associated Radio Pictures, and British Dominion Films. Its circuit in 1933 also included the Wintergarden Theatre (Brisbane), Lyric Theatre (Newcastle), the Plaza and Lyceum Theatres (Sydney), the Majestic and Plaza Theatres (Melbourne), the Prince of Wales Theatre (Perth), and his Majesty's Theatre (Hobart).

¹⁰ A newly constructed West's Cinema eventually opened on the site in 1939.

During his final ten years with Greater Union, Claude Webb firmly cemented his position as Adelaide's leading cinema manager. One of his more significant contributions during that time was to help oversee the construction and opening of the new West's Cinema in 1939.¹¹



MR. E. F. LANE (second from left), a member of the management committee of Greater Union Theatres, inspecting the work on the new State Theatre [sic], which is being built on the site of the old West's Theatre, in Hindley street. On his left is Mr. Claude E. Webb, South Australian representative of Greater Union. Source: *News* (Adelaide) 16 May 1939, 10.

Claude Webb resigned from Greater Union in March 1941. At a farewell function he indicated his intention to take a long-overdue holiday before entering into business on his own. His last known whereabouts (to date) were as the manager of the New Theatre in Strathalbyn (some 60 kilometres south-east of Adelaide).

Although Webb's career from the mid-1910s was largely in cinema management, he nevertheless had some involvement in variety theatre during that time. This was largely through Union Theatres Vaudeville which was established in 1925 in order to supplement film programmes on its Australian circuit. Prior to the advent of talkies, Webb also occasionally engaged between-films singers and actor/entertainers (for cinematic prologues). In this respect he was reportedly the pioneer of silent film prologues in Adelaide. His position as a representative for the Australian Broadcasting Company also brought him into contact with the variety industry.

In addition to his managerial responsibilities Webb contributed articles to several trade journals, including one for an Adelaide paper in 1925 (focusing on the US picture industry as seen through an Australian's eyes).¹² He was also well-known as an amateur fisherman.

ADDITIONAL QUOTATIONS AND ANECDOTES

- 1914: Brisbane:** Claude E. Webb had everything properly arranged for the opening of the George Willoughby Dramatic Company at His Majesty's Theatre, Brisbane, on July 30. The opening production was *The Beggar Girl's Wedding*, with George Cross and Vera Remeé as the leads (*Australian Variety* 15 July, 1914, n. pag.).
- 1922: Adelaide:** The York, since its opening, has made rapid strides under the management of Mr. Claude E. Webb ("*At the Play.*" *Critic* 26 Apr. 1922, 8).
- 1924: Adelaide:** The York Theatre, under the management of Mr Claude Webb, is more than holding its own against all opposition. This is another house where the public are properly catered for, and the programmes submitted are of the highest standard. Entertainment value in this house is always 100 percent, both as far as pictures and artists are concerned ("*In Adelaide.*" *Green Room* July 1924, 54).
- 1925:** Mr C.E. Webb is the popular manager of the York Theatre in that city [Adelaide], and is well-known in the picture and theatrical circles throughout the country (*Australian Variety* 18 May 1925, 27).
- 1925: Adelaide:** Having made a tour of the premises and been shown all the latest-appliances for supplying fresh air, cooling the building, and lighting it brilliantly, the pressman asked if there could be possibly anything more needed. This query was made in the charmingly furnished lounge, a rendezvous for patrons. 'We never stand still,' answered Mr. Webb. 'This is an age of progression. It is proposed by the board to spend a large amount of money on the stage, so that it will be possible to present any big vaudeville act with full accessories. We also intend to feature luxurious prologues, such as was done for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *The Sea Hawk*' ("*Four Happy Years.*" *Register* 5 Nov. 1925, 11).

¹¹ The newly-constructed West's Cinema opened on 1 December 1939.

¹² Ctd. "*South Australia.*" *Everyone's* (Sydney) 25 Feb. 1925, 22.

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

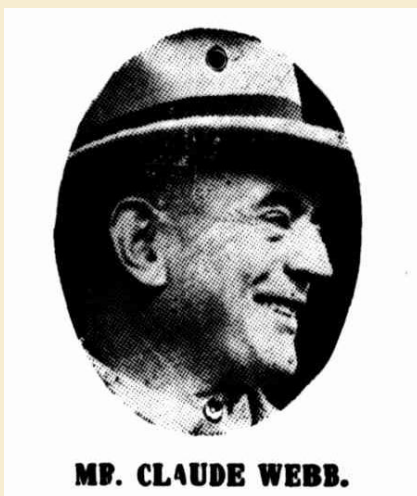
1. On 22 August 1918 Webb married Dolly Laker of Adelaide. The ceremony took place in Unley and the couple reportedly took up residence together at Henley Beach.¹³ The Webbs, who are known to have had at least two children - daughters Gwenda and Valerie (or Yvonne)¹⁴ - later moved to the seaside suburb of Glenelg.

Eldest daughter Gwenda Lois Webb married Lieutenant James Kingham Cooper, in August 1942. Cooper was the youngest son of Mrs. A.V. Cooper, of Victor Mansions, Glenelg, and the late Mr. A.V. Cooper.



MRS. CLAUDE E. WEBB, of Henley Beach, pictured with her little daughter Valerie, aged two years. Mayfair Portrait

News (Adelaide) 11 Nov. 1933, 6.



MR. CLAUDE WEBB.

Southern Argus (Port Elliot, SA) 27 May 1943, 5.



Advertiser (Adelaide) 1 Mar. 1941, 13.

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- "Managerial Triumph: The York's Second Birthday, A ." *Register* (Adelaide) 1 Nov. 1923, 11.
- "Picture Manager: Promotion to Tasmania." *Mail* (Adelaide) 14 May 1921, 7.
- "Union Theatres Big Contracts Announced. Newcastle Included - Merger Companies' Plans." *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* (NSW) 20 Oct. 1931, 6.
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- "West's - An All British House. Mr Webb to Manage." *News* (Adelaide) 23 Jan. 1933, 2.
- "York Theatre: Opening Next Saturday." *Register* (Adelaide) 2 Nov. 1921, 8.

¹³ "Weddings." *Mail* (Adelaide) 24 Aug. 1918, 10.

¹⁴ In reporting Gwenda Webb's marriage in 1942, the *Advertiser* identifies her sister as Yvonne (see: "Cooper-Webb Wedding." *Advertiser* 31 Aug. 1942, 3.

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