

## WALLY EDWARDS

Perhaps best known for his long association with Harry Clay, Wally Edwards started his vaudeville career as a singer in the 1890s. He toured with Clay's Australian Eleven company in 1897. The following year the two men were also members of J.L Travers' Continental Vaudeville Company. They continued their association in 1902 when Edwards began the first of 14 annual tours of the state under Clay's management, initially as a performer and later as a manager. He was also engaged as circuit manager for Clay's South-West New South Wales' line between 1916 and 1919. Edwards continued to perform as an entertainer, either in the role of singer or interlocutor, for most of his career.

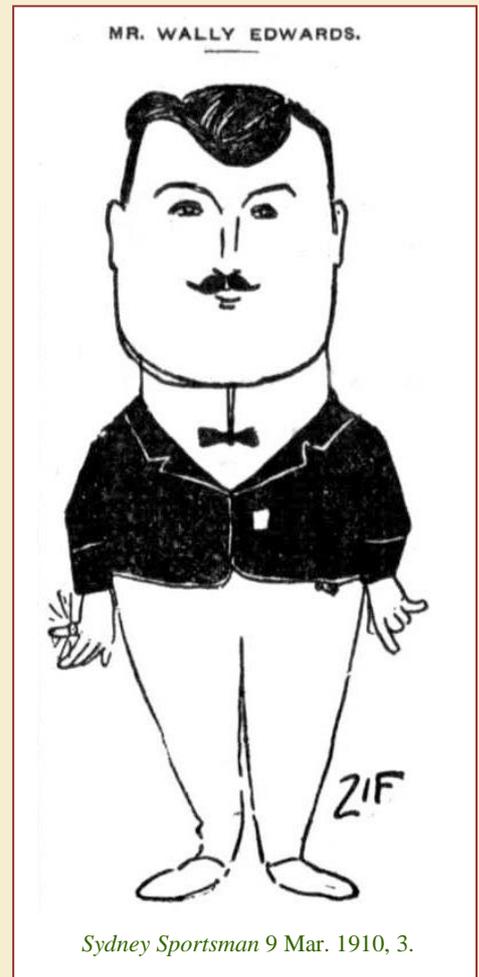
Wally Edwards' early life and career remains to date somewhat of a mystery. It is possible that he initially came from north Queensland, where the name W. Edwards is noted in relation to an amateur minstrel company, the Black Diamond Minstrel and Variety Company. It is recorded as having active around the Charters Towers region (ca.1894-1895). W. Edwards, in the advertising for these shows, was apparently both a singer and music director.<sup>1</sup> The first accurately documented appearance of Wally Edwards to date is, however, in 1896, when he was engaged to play the Sydney suburbs with Harry Clay's Australian Eleven Minstrel and Variety Company. After five months, from ca. October 1896 to March 1897, the troupe played a season at the Gaiety Theatre, Sydney. The following year he and Clay both toured through Queensland with J.L. Travers' Continental Vaudeville Company. In addition to his own solo turns Edwards frequently performed duets with Clay.

**GAIETY THEATRE.**  
Castlereagh-street, Sydney.  
**TO-NIGHT, TO-NIGHT,**  
**and every SATURDAY and MONDAY NIGHTS,**  
of the  
**AUSTRALIAN ELEVEN**  
**MINSTREL and VARIETY COMPANY** (originally),  
but now a Double Team (22 in number), after Five Months'  
Success in the Suburbs, and now the Rage.  
**ALL ARTISTS. ALL ARTISTS.**

<p><b>Andy Blanchard</b> <b>Dick Davis</b> <b>Wally Edwards</b> <b>Gus Franks</b> <b>Ted Sutton</b> <b>Harry Carlton</b> <b>Harry Clay</b> <b>James Driscoll</b> <b>George Rocks</b> <b>Essie Clay</b></p>	and others	<p><b>Kate Henry</b> <b>Violet Bishop</b> <b>Rose Fanning</b> <b>Annie Gray</b> <b>Maud Fanning</b> <b>Bertha Sutton</b> <b>Penelope Cole</b> <b>Lillie Florence</b> <b>Alice Lavigne.</b> <b>Ethel Smith.</b></p>
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**Efficient Orchestra.**  
**General Admission, Silver Coin.**  
**Orchestra Chairs, 1s.**

*Sydney Morning Herald 13 Mar. 1897, 2.*



Edwards' first engagement with Clay's minstrel and vaudeville company was in 1902 when he was employed as a baritone and endman for the entrepreneur's second tour of Queensland. The troupe at this time was billed as Clay's Waxworks and Vaudeville Company. Edwards specialised in illustrated songs, gaining a reputation in the northern state as one of the company's most popular personalities. Indeed he toured the state annually up until 1907, followed by a tour in 1909, and then each year between 1912 and 1918. During the last five tours he was employed as tour manager and/or business manager.

Around 1909 Edwards was engaged as the interlocutor and singer at the National Amphitheatre (Sydney). The *Theatre Magazine* refers to one of his performances that year:

Wally Edwards, the portly interlocutor at the Amphitheatre has a singing voice containing the penetrating qualities of a shell fired from a battleship... It may have only been a coincidence; but one night recently, when his vocal chords were working at high pressure, he filled the Amphitheatre with such an amount of sound that a loose brick in the far end of the building flew fairly out and half-way across the street, and narrowly missed killing a red-headed policeman as it fell.<sup>2</sup>

The *Sydney Sportsman* also published a poem by "Theatrical Tit-bits" editor, "The Flat," that year. According to the author "few could lick [Edwards] when it came to sing a song." The poem is accompanied by caricature by "Zif."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Northern Miner* (Charters Towers, Qld) 13 Nov. 1895, 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Theatre Magazine* (Sydney) Nov. 1909, 59.

<sup>3</sup> "Mr Wally Edwards." *Sydney Sportsman* 9 Mar. 1910, 3. See also the *Australian Variety Theatre Archive's* "Texts: Published" page (Poetry, Prose & Short Stories section)

Back on Clay time by 1912, Edwards continued to perform as an entertainer, turning to management duties in 1916 when the entrepreneur began his New South Wales South-western regional circuit. The *Theatre Magazine* records at this time:

Mr Edwards has so often toured Queensland with Mr Clay, from year to year, that he's as well known up that way as the principal himself. Evidently Mr Edwards' singing agrees with him, because he keeps so broadening out that, if he continues in the same manner, Mr Clay will have to give him a special stage all to himself. Slide and patriotic songs always were Mr Edwards' speciality.<sup>4</sup>

Edwards took on the management duties for the South-western line (primarily the Blue Mountains and mid-west region) up until 1919 in addition to his Queensland tour duties. He'd assumed the tour manager role from 1914. From around 1918, however, he had all but retired as a performer, returning to the stage in guest appearances only. In July 1919, it was reported that Edwards had been in a bad state of health for some time. He was subsequently given a benefit at the [Princess Theatre](#) that same month "by his life-long friend Harry Clay."<sup>5</sup> The following year he was well-enough to return to the stage for [Joe Archer's](#) benefit.

Although there are no references regarding Wally Edwards' career between 1920 and 1927, it is more than likely that he remained in a management position for [Harry Clay](#) on either one of his suburban or country circuits, or perhaps for some period of time at the [Bridge Theatre](#). In 1927, two years after Clay's death, he was recalled by the company to take on another Queensland tour, with headline act [Nellie Kolle](#).

*Lithgow Mercury* (NSW) 11 Apr. 1917, 3.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>ODDFELLOWS' HALL.</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Every Tuesday Night.</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Doors Open 7 p.m., Performance 8 p.m. sharp.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>HARRY CLAY'S HARRY</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">JAMIESON'S HANDSOME DRESSED REVUE—</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>"Fun at a Wedding."</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Specialty Artistes:—<b>LA PEARLE</b>, Contortionist; the Three Craydons, comedy team; Pagdon and Stanley, and many others whose turns are bound to be appreciated.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">ADMISSION.—1/- and 2/-. Plus Amusement Tax.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>WALLY EDWARDS, Manager.</b></p>
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Highly respected within the industry for his experience and reliability as a vaudeville manager, Wally Edwards was also considered one of the finest local bass-baritones around. The *Theatre Magazine* said of him: "Wally is as robust of voice as he is of person - which is saying a deal. When he attacks a high note the atmosphere fairly vibrates and trembles like a hysterical girl who has seen a ghost."<sup>6</sup> [Bert Howard](#) also recalled Edwards having given him the advice which led to his instigating the highly successful Sunday film screenings at the old [Gaiety Theatre](#) in Castlereagh Street.

### FURTHER REFERENCE:

Djubal, Clay. "Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company – 1865-1930." MA Thesis, The University of Queensland, 1998, v. pags.

<sup>4</sup> *Theatre Magazine* (Sydney) May 1916, n. pag.

<sup>5</sup> *Australian Variety & Show World* (Sydney) 18 July 1919, 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Theatre Magazine* (Sydney) Nov. 1909, 59.

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Expanded and updated from Clay Djubal, "Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company." MA Thesis. U of Qld (1998), Appendix E.  
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