

# PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

## ***Magic Lantern Leads to Local History***

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My column usually tells a story, but this one begins and ends with a mystery. My husband, Paul Monod, is a collector of magic lanterns, and enjoys trolling eBay on his computer, looking for interesting new examples. Last winter he was surprised to find one for sale with a local connection—a dealer in Maine was offering a magic lantern with accessories packed in a charming wooden box stenciled with the words:

*W.B. Atwood*

*West Cornwall, Vermont*

Paul found this unique object irresistible, made an offer and was soon the owner of the Cornwall magic lantern. After checking it out thoroughly, it seemed only right to give it a permanent home at the Henry Sheldon Museum. Surely it would be easy to find out all about its local owner. Who was W.B. Atwood and why does he seem to have owned this magic lantern?

Magic lanterns were the immediate precursors of the movie projector, the main difference being that their images did not move. The whole concept of projecting an image on to a wall fascinated Europeans from at least the 17th century, when the great Dutch optical scientist, Christian Huygens, invented a device that could use light to make an image on a glass slide appear on a wall. The sight of this ghostly apparition was so amazing that these devices were soon dubbed ‘magic lanterns.’

Magic lanterns were rare and precious at first, but by the mid-1800s they had become very popular. There were professional quality lanterns for people who gave shows in public places. Wealthy people also bought magic lanterns as parlor entertainments. A wide variety of slides became available—some with beautiful hand-painted scenes while others teemed with crude humor.

The most popular genre of magic lantern show was probably the travelogue, showing photographs of distant places. Many advertisements for such public viewings can still be found. Richard Balzer’s book, *Optical Amusements: Magic Lanterns* reproduces a typical one promising “Views of all Lands ... Strange Sights and Scenes of places you

read of, but never expect to see ... an evening's entertainment that is worth a college course ... EQUAL TO A TRIP AROUND THE GLOBE." Why leave home?

Magic lantern slides became ever more sophisticated, with 'slipping slides' adding hand-manipulated parts that made the images move, so that Pinocchio's nose 'grew' or a dog jumped through a hoop. These were extremely popular, helping to create a hunger for the moving image that would ultimately only be satisfied by the invention of the movies.

So what sort of magic lantern was this one from Cornwall? Paul was lucky enough to stumble across an ad for the exact same model, the "Electro Radiant Magic Lantern." It was made in New York City and seems to have been particularly popular in the 1880s. It was being marketed as a possible moneymaker: "Anyone with normal intelligence can operate it, and \$10 to \$50 per night may be earned by giving Parlor, Sunday School, Academy or Public Entertainments." The potential buyer is assured a profit, because this magic lantern will draw the public "with the combined power of the Circus, the Prestidigitateur, the Country Fair, the Temperance Crusade, and the Camp Meeting." All this income potential for the bargain sum of \$12!

Did Mr. W. B. Atwood of West Cornwall, Vermont succumb to the lure of the Electro Radiant? We have found out very little about him. A William Atwood, likely the same, lived on Rte. 74 in West Cornwall, just beyond the junction with South Bingham Street. He was a farmer, and all we know is that he wrote a letter to Henry Sheldon in 1887 in which he said he would "see him soon."

The imagination can fill in facts where they are this skimpy. Did Atwood make a sideline of giving magic lantern shows? Was there money to be made providing such entertainments in rural Vermont? Maybe it was just an amusing change from farming. Or perhaps he didn't buy it at all. Sometimes magic lanterns were given to children, who loved putting on "shows" in their own parlors. But this hardly seems likely in an age when only very fortunate children got \$12 Christmas gifts.

So I throw myself on the public, asking for information. Do any of the surviving Atwoods know more of William of West Cornwall? Has anyone ever seen an advertisement for a magic lantern show he might have given? Any idea how this particular magic lantern could have ended up in the hands of an antiques dealer in Maine? The fun of history is often the mystery.