

THE YOUTH'S COMPANION

Lester Smith

The *Youth's Companion* was an illustrated weekly newspaper first published in 1827 in Boston, USA, by the Perry Mason Company (Erle Stanley Gardner 'borrowed' the name for his fictional attorney-detective) and continued for over a hundred years until the late 1920s. By 1900 it had over half a million subscribers and was highly influential. While, as its name suggests, it started out as a publication for younger people, it evolved into a paper for all the family and so is an interesting source of social comment. Content included articles, current events, short stories, songs, poems, puzzles, projects and crafts. Contributors included Jack London, Mark Twain, Jules Verne and Emily Dickinson. It also contained wonderful adverts for toys and trinkets, dolls and fashion, mechanics and optics – and, of course, toy magic lanterns.

I have a number of copies in my collection dating from 1896 to 1907. Curiously all are published in October and are probably special editions for Christmas – they therefore contain particularly good adverts. We will reproduce a few selected pages in *The Magic Lantern* here and in future issues. The first extract shown, from 1896, is clearly a Christmas advert and the second, from 1899, is for the new 'Ideal' magic lantern sold exclusively to *Companion* readers. It is "safe, brilliant and easy to use" and "for double the price there is no lantern as good and practical as the 'Ideal'". Not only does it come with 24 views of



The *Youth's Companion* from 1896 (top) and 1899 (bottom)

either the US Army or Navy, but it also includes 72 admission tickets and a show bill to encourage entrepreneurial young magic lantern showpeople.

MAGIC LANTERN SOCIETY NOTICE BOARD (cont'd from p.2)



Pat and Ray Gilbert write: "John Taylor died on 3 December, after a protracted illness. Despite being a very private man, he was a showman and enthusiastic as well as a loyal member of the Society. He gave many shows, with his wife Elaine, to clubs and organisations within striking distance of their home. We spent many holidays with them and they with us, sharing our mutual interest in National Trust properties. Our condolences go to his widow Elaine."

OPTICAL TOY AUCTION ... coming soon

On Wednesday 6 March 2019 Bearnes, Hampton and Littlewood of Exeter will auction Philip Banham's collection of optical toys and optical prints including some rare stereoscopic images and viewers, magic lantern slides and photographs. There will be a section relating to The Great Exhibition of 1851 and Crystal Place 1854.

Philip Banham writes: "In the catalogue all 231 lots will be beautifully illustrated in colour with a total of approximately 600 photographs together with many detailed footnotes and references. The catalogue cover shown here shows the front and back of Lot 26: 'A 19th century hand cut paper transformation silhouette The Astrologer & Lady, brown and white paper layered to produce the image of an empty cave by day and occupied by an astrologer and lady by moonlight, inscribed as per title to reverse, image size 31 x 22.5cm. Estimate £100-120. When back lit the astrologer appears as if by magic and the ghost of a lady in white is revealed.'

"Many of the items have been used over the last thirty years to entertain audiences attending museum study days, lectures in art galleries and other events. It is now time to pass these artefacts to other enthusiasts."



Wilhelm Widenmann has sent this Mittelstrass advert from 1876 announcing "a big selection of very effective pictures" – ie a then frequently used joke box, producing a little devil!

This is a glimpse of the spectacular panorama of painted backdrops and live actors in the Oceania exhibition, now finished at the RA in London. But it is touring the world so catch it if you can.

