

13. Star Village



The Star Theatre is significant to the social history of Darwin, being the second open-air theatre in Darwin and renowned for the many great movies screened there, including the infamous 'ranch' or 'western' nights on Thursdays.

The block was bought by Harold Snell in 1928. He built the theatre, which opened on 14 September 1929 with seating for 860 people, offices and a milk bar. Snell sold the theatre to Christina Gordon and sons in 1930. Tom Derreck Harris was the manager at the time and sometimes organised live entertainment (he regularly sang and played ukulele). In 1941, Harris leased the theatre from the Gordons.

Like most other buildings in Darwin, the theatre was compulsorily acquired by the military during World War II and was not returned to the Gordons until 1951, although the public was allowed back to the theatre in 1946.

Harris was granted a lease over the building in 1952 and in 1958 installed air-conditioning and undertook some modernisation. The theatre was destroyed in Cyclone Tracy in 1974. Tom Harris Junior built the Star Arcade in 1980. The name is a reminder of the part the theatre played in the cultural life of Darwin for 45 years.¹

¹ Welke & Wilson, *Darwin Central Area Heritage Study*, 1993, p 187.

History

The opening of the theatre was welcomed with this item in the *Northern Territory Times*:

The Star Picture Theatre will open tomorrow night with that wonderful picture entitled "The Cat and the Canary". This picture has created world-wide public interest and recently enjoyed a record season in metropolitan theatres.²

A little technical information followed:

The pictures total about 10 000 feet for each night and a start will be made punctually at 8 p.m.

No expense has been spared in catering for the comfort of patrons and beautifully clear pictures entirely devoid of flicker have been tried out during the week.³

The following week, the paper reported on the theatre's success:

A big house greeted the opening night of the Star Pictures on Saturday last. Ten thousand feet of film were thrown on the screen, beautifully clear and without the slightest hitch, except that Mr Allwright while attending to the engine got his hand caught in a rapidly moving belt and badly lacerated several fingers. The comfort of the theatre and its splendid appearance generally occasioned much favorable comment.⁴

In 1946, the Gordons were compensated for Commonwealth acquisition of their property in the amount of £12,220. They were then granted a lease until 1951; this, they sub-leased to Tom Harris Senior.⁵

Tom Harris Senior was known as Tomaris and it is after him that the Rotary Club of Darwin's Tomaris Melbourne Cup Sweep was named. In fact, the sweep was run by Tom Harris Senior from 1934 until his death in 1973 after which the Rotary Club of Darwin took it over. The sweep was last run in 2003 when Makybe Diva won that race and the ticket holder, F Blackburn, collected \$25,000. Winning tickets are displayed near the projector in the entrance to the Village.

Tom Harris Junior was the Member for Port Darwin in the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly from 13 August 1977 until 26 October 1990⁶. He built the arcade in 1980.

Brough Newell, Solicitor, had an office adjoining the theatre during the 1950s and used to become annoyed by the noise when he was working at night. One suspects this was particularly the case on 'ranch' or 'western' night.

...Newell's favourite weapon of retaliation, we think, was a frying pan. Hugh Bradley recalled that when the noise was too much, Newell would run the pan along the corrugated iron common wall with the theatre, making quite a racket. What impact it had is not known.⁷

² 13 September 1939, p 6.

³ 13 September 1939, p 6.

⁴ *Northern Territory Times*, 20 September 1929, p4.

⁵ Welke and Wilson, p 187.

⁶ Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory.

⁷ Smith, *Antecedents: A history of Ward Keller*, 2013; p74

Additional Photographs



*1929 – Star Theatre under construction.
Image: FR Morris Collection, NT Library.*

STAR PICTURES

THE HOUSE FOR QUALITY PICTURES

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 12.

(TO-MORROW)

BACK TO GOD'S COUNTRY

a wonderful and spectacular picture.

COMEDY, NEWS AND DRAMA



Northern Territory Times advertisement, 11 October 1929.



*1930 – inside the theatre (note segregated seating).
Image: George Hulme Cole Collection, NT Library.*



1950s – Star Theatre.
Image: Chrissie Paspalis Collection, NT Library.



Tom Harris [Junior], MLA. Member for Port Darwin. 1981.
Image: NT Government Collection.