

## AUSTRALIAN ELEVEN MINSTREL AND VARIETY COMPANY

Formed in 1896 by Harry Clay, The Australian Eleven operated intermittently up until 1899, alternating tours through the Sydney suburbs while making occasional short forays into regional NSW. Among the more prominent members of the company were his wife, and daughter, Wally Edwards, Harry Carlton, Ted Sutton, Edwin Shipp and Gus Franks. By 1901 Clay's was able to establish a more permanent organisation, leading to the formation of Clay's Waxworks and Comedy Co.

Having been a professional variety performer for over a decade, and with a small amount of managerial experience behind him, possibly as a manger at St George's Hall, Newtown, Harry Clay put together his first minstrel troupe in 1886. Named the Australian Eleven (in response to the number of performers), the troupe's first known engagements were in the Sydney suburbs from around October that year. By April 1897, however, the line-up had expanded to almost a double combination. Among the best known performers were the team of Carlton and Sutton (Harry Carlton and Ted Sutton), Wally Edwards (who was later to become one of Clay's senior managers and long-time NSW/Qld tourist), Gus Franks, Edwin Shipp (father of Les Shipp) and George Rocks (father of Joe Rox). Clay's wife Kate (billed as Kate Henry) and daughter Essie were also members of the company.

**G A I E T Y                      T H E A T R E,**  
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.**

Andy Blanchard		Kate Henry
Dick Davis		Violet Bishop
Wally Edwards	and others.	Rose Fanning
Gus Franks		Annie Gray
Ted Sutton		Maud Fanning
Harry Carlton		Bertha Sutton
Harry Clay		Penelope Cole
James Driscoll		Lillie Florence
George Rocks		Alice Lavigne.
Essie Clay		Ethel Smith.

**Efficient Orchestra.**  
**General Admission, Silver Coin.**  
**Orchestra Chairs, 1s.**

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

In March 1897 Clay had established the troupe's reputation to the point that he was prepared to risk leasing Sydney's Gaiety Theatre for a short season of Saturday and Monday nights - a strategy he later used for much of his long association with the Royal Standard Theatre. A review of the 3 April show published in the Sydney Morning Herald suggests that the company provided a solid performance:

The first part went smoothly. In the second Mr Frank Hyman, the contortionist, Messrs Carlton and Sutton, and Edwin Shipp were successful in their specialties, and the McDougall Sisters did some good dancing and singing. Miss Violet Bishop sang several capital comic songs. Messrs. Henry Clay and Wally Edwards received great applause for their duet "All's Well." In his character of "the Little Turk," Gus Edwards had a good reception (5 Apr. 1897, 3).

The Australian Eleven was never conceived as a permanent operation by Clay, but more of an opportunity to provide himself and his vaudevillian friends the chance of fill-in engagements. In this respect Clay spent several period of time between 1896 and 1899 touring with other companies - notably Billy Speed's World's Novelty Company (1896), the Mascotte Minstrel and Variety Co (1898), J. L. Travers Continental Vaudeville Co (1898), and G. Sullivan's Continental Vaudeville Co (1899). The fact that he was able to continue operating the Australian Eleven during these four years suggests, however, that the tours paid their way, and that they were also building both his managerial experience and his wider reputation as an emerging entrepreneur.

**G A I E T Y                      T H E A T R E,**  
Castlereagh-street, Sydney.  
**TO-MORROW NIGHT, and**  
**Every SATURDAY and MONDAY NIGHTS,**  
**4th Week of the AUSTRALIAN ELEVEN, 4th Week.**  
**MINSTREL and VARIETY COMPANY.**  
**NEW PROGRAMME and NEW ARTISTS.**  
**First Appearance of**  
**FRANK HYMAN and EDWIN SHIPP,**  
**HARRY CLAY, WALLY EDWARDS, ESSIE CLAY, &c.**  
**Efficient Orchestra. General Admission, Silver Coin.**  
**Orchestra Chairs, 1s.**

*Sydney Morning Herald 2 Apr. (1897), 2.*

The last known engagements by the Australian Eleven were in early 1899, during which time the troupe undertook another tour of the suburban districts of Sydney.

## SEE ALSO

- [Harry Clay](#)
- [Kate Clay](#)
- [Essie Clay](#)
- [Wally Edwards](#)

## PERSONNEL

1. **Performers** incl. Violet Bishop, Andy Blanchard, Harry Carlton, Essie Clay, Harry Clay, Penelope Cole, Dick Davis, James Driscoll, Wally Edwards, Rose Fanning, Gus Franks, Lillie Florence, Annie Gray, Pat Green, Kate Henry, Charles Howard, Frank Hyman, Alice Lavigne, McDougall Sisters, George Rocks, Edwin Shipp, Ethel Smith, Spencer Bros, Bertha Sutton, Ted Sutton.

### 2. Additional Notes and/or Historical Clarification:

- **Carlton and Sutton:** Patterologists, sketch comedians.
- **Pat Green:** Irish athlete and axe swinger
- **Frank Hyman:** Contortionist.
- **McDougal Sisters:** song and dance duo
- **Edwin Shipp:** Comedian.

TOWN HALL, LIVERPOOL,  
WEDNESDAY NIGHT NEXT, MAY 4th,  
and every alternate Wednesday.  
HARRY CLAY'S AUSTRALIAN ELEVEN  
COMEDY AND VARIETY COMPANY.  
New Programme.  
Performance from 8 till 9:30. Dance from 9:30 till 11  
Admission--Front Seats, including Dance, 1s.  
Back Seats, admit to performance only, 6d.  
Dance 6d.

*Liverpool Herald (NSW) 30 Apr. (1898), 7.*

## ENGAGEMENTS CHRONOLOGY

1896: [HARRY CLAY](#) (Sydney suburban tour; ca. Oct-Dec.\*)

1897: [HARRY CLAY](#) (Sydney suburban tour; ca. Jan. - Mar. \*) • (Gaiety Th, Syd; 13 Mar. - \* > Saturday and Monday nights only)

NB: Some of the Australian Eleven, including Harry, Kate and Essie Clay, also toured Queensland with J. L. Travers' Continental Vaudeville Co (ca. Aug. - Oct.)

1899: [HARRY CLAY](#) (Sydney suburban tour; 2 Jan. - \*)

NB 1: Australian Eleven engagements incl. Parramatta TH; 2, 26 Jan.)

NB 2: Some of the Australian Eleven, including Harry, Kate and Essie Clay, also toured Queensland with G. Sullivan's Continental Vaudeville Co (ca. Aug. - Oct.)

## FURTHER REFERENCE

"Gaiety Theatre." SMH: 5 Apr. (1897), 3.

"Harry Clay's Show." CAFA: 31 Dec. (1898), 4.

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