

## PAT HANNA

Variety entertainer, artist, film actor/scriptwriter/ director and producer, entrepreneur, inventor, sportsman. Pat Hanna was largely associated as an entertainer specialising in "digger" roles and entertainment. He also excelled as an inventor, being responsible for creating and developing army munitions, a sporting game, a new type of fishing rod, and a fuse for grenades. The latter invention also resulted in a manual for the Australian and New Zealand armies. To the public, however, Hanna's name was largely linked to the Famous Diggers, a variety troupe regarded as being among the most successful to tour the Antipodes during the 1920s. Arguably the most popular feature of the company's shows were the military sketches, many of which starred the characters Chic (Hanna) and Bert (Will Crawford). Following Crawford's departure, Chic's off-sider became known as Joe Mulga (Joe Valli). A number of incidents worked on the live stage were worked into screenplays for two of Hanna's best-known films, *Diggers* (1931) and *Diggers in Blighty* (1933). His third and final film was *Waltzing Matilda* (1933).

Described by Mimi Colligan in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* as "a man of boundless energy and enthusiasm" who excelled as an artist, actor, writer, and inventor (186), Pat Hanna was largely associated throughout his career as an entertainer specialising in "digger" roles. Eric Reade notes, too, that "his gift, in films as elsewhere, was his ability to provide the public with what it wanted without ever compromising himself into corniness or false sentiment" (129). The son of Irish hotel keeper Patrick Hanna and his Australian wife Mary Jane (nee Carnie), George Patrick Hanna was born at Whitianga, New Zealand on 18 March 1888. His talent for drawing led to his undertaking an apprenticeship as a sign writer after leaving school. He was later employed as a cartoonist for the *Free Lance* (Wellington), while also running his own commercial art and sign-writing business. In August 1914, he enlisted in the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, initially serving as a private in the Pacific region with the Samoan Advance Party. In 1916, he was transferred to Europe, where he joined the Otago Regiment; by 1918, he had been commissioned as a lieutenant. "On November 11, 1918 our New Zealand division of 30,000 men marched into Cologne, Germany," he recalls. "We became an army of occupation. As Battalion Bombing Officer I was blithely handing over all the unexploded portion of my iron rations - Mills bombs, grenades etc - when suddenly the General wanted to see me. I reported forthwith and was promptly promoted - or demoted - to O. C. Entertainment and Recreation, New Zealand Division on the Rhine" (qtd. Reade). His orders were to promote all possible entertainment and recreation for the division during its off-duty periods (according to Hanna, this was an attempt to stop soldiers fraternising with the frauleins and Germans in general). It was during this time that he invented the game of Batinton [see *Batinton section below*].



Source: Victorian Performing Arts Centre (Pat Hanna Collection)

As part of his brief, Hanna put together the Diggers Concert Party, taking on the multiple roles of actor, writer, and director. The troupe performed at camps in France, England, and North America, before making its way to New Zealand in 1919 (as The Vice Regals) and Australia in 1920.<sup>1</sup> Although the initial leg of their Australian tour (as The Famous Digger Pierrots) was produced under the management of J. C. Williamson's Ltd, the troupe later operated largely under Hanna, often in association with circuits run by those such Birch, Carroll and Coyle (Queensland) and Dix-Baker (Newcastle and Adelaide). In the late 1920s, the troupe, by then known as Pat Hanna's Diggers, played at least one season under Williamson's (Adelaide 1927/1928).

The first ensemble to tour the Antipodes had an all-male line-up, including G. Wright, Will Crawford, Sydney Exton, George Long (female impersonator), and Lance Fairfax. The company's leader was invariably billed as G. P. Hanna. Within a short time, however, the troupe began to engage female performers. This was likely in response to the need to both broaden its entertainment value and distinguish itself from a number of all-male 'digger' troupes that specialised in female impersonations. Among the first women to appear with the company were Ethel Hartley and Clarice Norman. From 1922 onwards, the Diggers included Hanna's wife, Jessie (nee Meadows), a Melbourne resident who worked a musical act with her sister Hilda. Equally adept at violin, piano, and singing, the sisters had by then established themselves in Melbourne and Victoria, and at one time took their act to America. Hanna and Meadows married on 8 April 1922 at St Kilda, Melbourne, during the Diggers' extended season at the beachside suburb. A

<sup>1</sup> New information has recently come to light which suggests that two affiliated Famous Diggers troupes were operating simultaneously in Australia and New Zealand between ca. April 1920 and December 1921. A research project is currently being undertaken (as of 10 November 2014) and a new updated biography is planned for publication in early Jan. 2015.

number of other female performers were later engaged as performers in the troupe, including Iza Crossley, Moya Crossley, Rozette Powell, Ivy Ray, and Floe Dean. Among the male members over the years were several performers with established reputations, notably Bert Gilbert, Joe Valli, and Les Coney. Other key performers engaged by the company during the 1920s included Stan Lawson, Clyde Fields, Jock Thompson, Brian Lawrence, Frank Moran, Jim Foran, Roy Binsmead, and Ern Kopke.



*Illustrated Tasmanian Mail* 5 May (1921), 23.

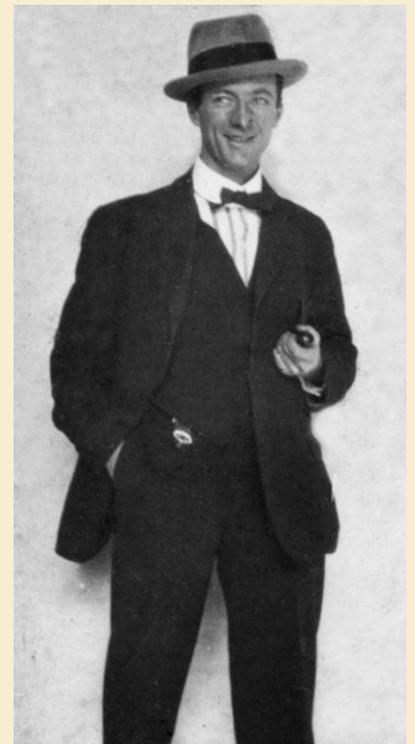
the Queensland capital was met with applause that went on for "what seemed like several minutes" (29 Apr. 1926, 9). Further evidence of his popularity can be seen in his special guest appearance at Brisbane's Wintergarden Theatre in 1927. Hanna was invited to perform a solo act in front of the Duke and Duchess of York, flying to the Queensland capital from Melbourne for the one appearance (TBRs: 10 Apr. 1927, n. pag.).

In 1931, having been encouraged by the continued success of his troupe, and particularly the comedy sketches he had been writing for his shows, Hanna convinced Frank Thring and Efftee Films to finance and produce his film *Diggers*. Although the film was well received by Australian and New Zealand audiences, an argument between Thring and Hanna resulted in the pair ending their association, and Hanna subsequently went on to form his own production company. The follow-up film, *Diggers in Blighty*, was released in 1933 and was exhibited widely as a joint screening with George Wallace's *Harmony Row*. Despite being accorded much support from critics and the public, the film was not a financial success for Hanna, due to the distribution deal he made. 1933 also saw him produce and release another film, *Waltzing Matilda*. The following year, Hanna travelled to the United States to promote his films, and came to be billed as the "Down Under Will Rogers." In addition to his film career during the 1930s, Hanna made a number of gramophone recordings of his comedy monologues, including two particular favourites, "The Gospel According to Cricket" and "Mademoiselle from Armentieres." In 1937, he was also given his own radio show on 3LO.

When the Second World War broke out, Hanna became an honorary bomb instructor. Among his achievements during the war were a bomb-training manual that he devised and an igniter for petrol grenades that he invented. In 1943, a letter from the Canadian Department of Trade and Commerce to the Canadian Trade Minister even acknowledged Hanna's development of the fusee (the ignition device for petrol grenades) and asked the minister to express the Canadian government's 'grateful thanks... for his generous action' (ctd. Pat Hanna Collection). He also resumed his development and promotion of the game (Batminton) that he had invented during the previous world war.

Although the troupe was very much an ensemble company, an examination of reviews published over the course of the Diggers' association with Australia suggests that Hanna was the principal performer. In addition to his work in comedy routines and digger character sketches, he regularly presented 'gospel'-style stump speeches and lectures. For his gospel speeches, he dressed as a padre and talked about topical/local events and people. During his early years with the Famous Diggers, he invariably focused his satire on the local newspaper(s). In Marlborough (New Zealand), for example, he would offer the "Gospel According to the *Marlborough Express*." In Perth (Western Australia), it became the "Gospel According to the *Daily News* and *Sunday Times*." In later years, he switched to popular topics such as cricket, fishing, golf, and horseracing. His comic lectures were also often presented under the loose title "A Few Moments," during which he would don a different disguise.

Hanna also specialised in drawing lightning sketches (cartoons) of prominent people and members of the audience, using materials such as chalk, charcoal, and pen and ink. Such was his popularity by the mid-1920s that it wasn't uncommon for his first appearance on stage to stop the show. A *Brisbane Courier* critic reports in 1926, for example, that his return to



Source: Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand

Following the end of the war, Hanna spent much of his time and energy introducing Batminton to the Australian and New Zealand public. He also occasionally appeared on radio and in live theatrical productions. Among his known engagements were a role in a sketch by Ralph Peterson that was broadcast on 25 April 1945 by 2FC (Sydney) as part of the station's "Army Hour" program. The producer was Corporal Sumner Locke-Elliott. In 1947, he began advertising a new type of fishing rod that he had invented. The design was based on the (flat) skein used for winding wool.

In 1951, Hanna took part in *The Passing Show*, a 3AR broadcast on 24 April that also featured George Wallace. Hanna performed a poem that describes the boredom, the menial work, and the lack of heroism that was all too often part of the ordinary soldier's life during the First World War.

Hanna's ongoing involvement with Batinton meant that he and Jessie were eventually forced to settle in England on a permanent basis beginning in 1961. The following year, he opened a factory in Clapham that was devoted to producing all necessary equipment for the sport. Hanna remained in England until his death at Ampthill, Bedfordshire, in 1973. He was survived by his wife and a son and daughter.

### **SEE ALSO**

- [Famous Diggers](#)

### **HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS**

1. The sketch performed by Hanna on *The Passing Show* (3AR radio broadcast) in 1954 is believed to have been an adaptation of poem (or poems) titled "The Hero's Life" / "Daddy and the Great War" / "Any Soldier to His Son." The Pat Hanna Collection (PACM) includes manuscript copies of both works, with handwritten additions and revisions presumably by Hanna.
2. Sorbie Tower, also known as Sorbie Castle, is situated on level ground about a mile east of the village of Sorbie and five miles south of Wigtown in Scotland. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry on Hanna incorrectly names the Clan Hannay's ancestral home as "Scorbie Tower."
3. During his career in Australia, Pat Hanna was largely based out of Melbourne. His known places of abode, including England, were:
  - ca. 1930s and 1940s: 9 St Leonards Avenue, St Kilda, Melbourne.
  - ca. 1950s: 253 Beaconsfield Parade, Little Park, Melbourne.
  - ca. 1961-1974: Ampthill, Bedfordshire (England). He also operated his Batinton factory at 60 Clapham Road, London, from 1962 onwards.

### **PAT HANNA'S PERFORMANCE STYLE**

1. Reviews of Pat Hanna in performance during his association with the Famous Diggers include the following:

Mr Hanna recited his experiences with St Peter in a dream, the result of Armistice night liberations, when "wash out" was written against his name and he was returned to "Aussie." He also figured as a "cave man" but this was the genus of "haves" (BC: 14 Dec. 1923, 13).

During his last two programmes Pat Hanna, whose show - "The Diggers" - has been eclipsing all records at the Cremorne (Brisbane), has started a series of caricatures of caricaturists. Hallet, Stan Cross, Cecil Hartt, George Finney, Driffield, Little and Jonsson - household names as *Smith's [Weekly]* artists - have been served up to the audiences in a new form. With great originality Hanna (whose ability as a comedian is on par with his skill as a black-and-white artist) has picked out their universally known characters, and is presenting them in a pot-pourri to the public - to the accompaniment of roars of laughter' (SW: 31 May 1924, n. pag.).

Pat Hanna displayed his versatility by appearing as a dear old pedantic parson with topical allusion to the City Council, accompanied by many "verily's" and "I say unto you" in which the names of prominent officials were dignified with an old-world rendering (Pat Hanna Collection clipping - Performing Arts Centre, Melbourne).

- "The Gospel According to..." is known to have been staged as early 1921. An unidentified review from the Hastings (New Zealand) newspaper from that year indicates, for example, that he performed "The Gospel of Hawke's Bay," which included clever local points and introduced such topicalities as the names of local celebrities, the cost of living, the state of Havelock Road, and the depleted council exchequer. Another unidentified clipping from New Zealand in 1921 reports that Hanna performed the same "Gospel" in Napier, this time with references to the Hastings street tram extension and the bus route to the hospital. Other reviews during the 1920s record:

Hanna did an amusing parody on local happenings from the gospels of the *Daily News* and the *Sunday Times*, in which "James, the son of Mitchell" and "William, the son of Lathem" were humorously featured. Mr Hanna adopts an inimitable biblical phraseology... Later he [...] distinguished himself as an artist, rapidly sketching, with chalk, members of the audience and presenting the picture to the selected victim, who was picked out of the semi-darkness by a reflector manipulated by Miss Hilda Meadows. Then he appeared as a "dinkum digger" in the final war comedy, in which he played with typical digger nonchalance (DN: 16 Apr. 1923, n. pag.).

The director of the show, Mr G. P. Hanna, is one of the happiest of the artists, and his sketch of an ancient clergyman who translates the mundane into clerical language had the house convulsed. He took his text from the Gospel according to the *Courier*, and preached concerning the landing of Oxley, whom he makes to say: "Verily, verily, this Brisbane is a dinkum possy." Other topical subjects made up a screamingly funny sermon'... [His] "Shooting of Dan McGrew," a recitation with screened action of the parts, was as realistic as could be desired (BC: 17 Nov. 1923, 10).

- In relation to Hanna's marionette act, the *Argus* reports in 1925 that 'a topical marionette specialty [by] Mr Hanna and Mr Gilbert introduced some up-to-date variations into the song, "Mr Gallagher and Mr Shean." The shipping strike and some characters associated with it form the basis of most of the variations.' A *Brisbane Courier* review the following year indicates that 'a new phase in the of the Hanna-Gilbert marionette show, which included a wealth of sly topical allusion, almost literally brought the house down' (15 May 1926, 22).
- Hanna's other popular songs and comedy routines include [dates provided are first known performance only]:

'Captain Cook'

'Mister Gallagher and Mr Sheen'

'The Shooting of Dan McGrew' (Nov. 1923) - performed to action scenes projected on a screen.



*Bulletin* 13 May (1920), 44.



*Bulletin* 17 Sept. (1925), 34.

## **JESSIE MEADOWS - EARLY CAREER ENGAGEMENTS (incl. Hilda Meadows)**

**1915:** n/e (Athenaeum Hall, Melb; 25 March\* > Jessie; ctd. TBT: 25 Mar. 1915, n. pag.) • ('Belgian Button Day' concert, Melb; 3 May > Jessie; ctd. AMND: 1 July 1915, n. pag.).

**NB:** Jessie and Hilda Meadows were also involved in numerous fund-raising and tribute concerts held at Footscray, Broadmeadows and Geelong throughout 1915, including the Orpheon Choristers Concert at Footscray (ctd. Pat Hanna Collection - Performing Arts Centre, Melbourne).

**1917:** (Town Hall, Melbourne; 15 Nov.\* - Hilda > ctd. *Age* 16 Nov. 1917, n. pag.).

**1918:** (Hastings, Victoria; Feb.\* > Jessie and Hilda, accompanied Rosa Alba; ctd. PENP: 15 Feb. 1918, n. pag. - The sisters are reported as being from Albert Park).

**1919:** (Hotel Victoria, Beaconsfield Parade, Melb; Apr.\* > Jessie and Hilda).

**NB:** Unidentified newspaper clipping records, "Musical tea at Hotel Victoria... for army nurses motored to and from the hotel by members of the Ladies' Automobile Club... The two Miss Meadows, just back from an American trip [...] sang delightful solos and duets, in addition to solos on the piano and violin" (Pat Hanna Collection, n. pag.).

## **BATINTON**

According to Hanna, the game of Batinton came about in response to the need to provide physical recreation for the 30,000 New Zealand soldiers stationed in Germany. Among the other immediate problems he needed to overcome were expenditure and limited space. Hanna's ingenuity was to devise a game that not only required less area than a tennis court, was easy to learn, and could accommodate up to 48 players at a time, but also allowed for any player, whatever their size or ability. Another feature of the game was its speed.

Batminton resembles Badminton in that it is played with shuttlecocks on a marked-out rectangular court divided at its mid point by a net. The game was originally played using a cork bat (rather than a badminton racquet) and a hard shuttlecock made of feathers. The bat resembles a table-tennis paddle with an elongated handle. Although designed to played on a court 36 feet long and 12 feet wide, the width can be varied according to the available space. Despite its initial popularity, Batminton drifted into relative obscurity, largely because not enough shuttlecocks could not be manufactured to keep up with demand and the public lost interest. However, the game saw a resurgence in popularity during the Second World War, again due to its capacity for being played in limited spaces.

The game was introduced into Australia in 1940, but again the supply of shuttlecocks could not meet the demand and its popularity faltered. The eventual development of plastic shuttlecocks, however, meant that the game did not disappear altogether. The game has a cult following today, with the only two organisations known being the Whitwell Batinton Club in Derbyshire (England) and the Maryborough Social Batinton Club (Queensland, Australia). The Whitwell Batinton Club's website address is [www.whitwellbatintonclub.co.uk](http://www.whitwellbatintonclub.co.uk)

Hanna's involvement in the creation and development of Batinton was not without difficulties, according to correspondence with Gerald Patterson of Spaldings. In a letter dated 8 November 1943, Hanna complains about the company's decision to pay him royalties on only one brand of shuttle and not all, a decision Hanna claims was not in the spirit of the agreement made on 15 February 1940. 'This is quite apart from the fact that I worked continuously from your office for several months and continuously throughout the war, without any pay or commission demonstrating this game to every branch of Defence. Thousands of Recreation and Physical Training offices and N. C. O.s from all the Central Training Schools saw the vital quality of the game and demanded Batinton' (ctd. Pat Hanna Collection). In the early 1950s, Hanna also considered suing several shuttlecock manufacturers in the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, and USA, but was advised against such action by a patent attorney (ctd. Pat Hanna Collection - letter dated 9 July 1951).

## **RECORDINGS**

[The following recordings are available commercially and/or through various Australian libraries]

### **Original Vinyl Recordings:**

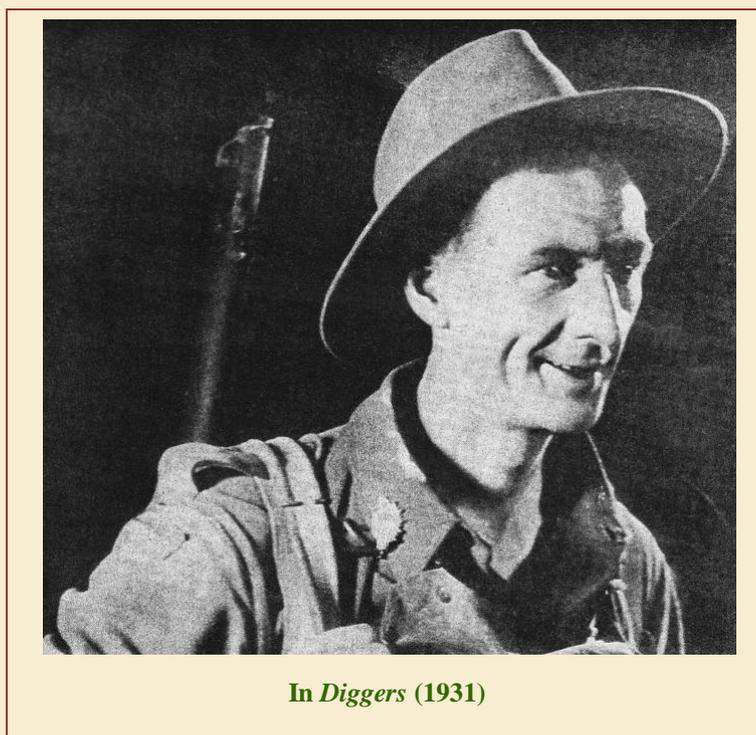
- "Cricket-isms" b/w "The Gospel According to Racing" [1934]
- "The Gospel According to Cricket" b/w "It Isn't Love, It's Bacchus" [1929]

### **Compilations (compact disks):**

- *Australian Memories: Recordings from 1927-1943*. Crystal Stream Audio, CD, IDCD10, 1998 ('The Gospel According to Cricket').
- *Australian Memories - Volume 2: Recordings from 1927-1943*. Crystal Stream Audio, CD, IDCD19, 2004 ('Cricket-isms').

- *Australian Memories - Volume 3: Recordings from 1927-1952*. Crystal Stream Audio, CD, IDCD134, 2005 ('The Gospel According to Cricket' / 'The Gospel According to Racing').
- *Boiled Beef and Cabbage: Australian Stars of the International Music Hall*. Larrikin, CD, LRH 325, 1994.
- *Is 'e an Aussie is 'e Lizzie?: Australian Stars of the International Music Hall*. Larrikin, CD, LRH 324, 1994 ('The Gospel According to Racing').
- *Stars of the Australian Stage and Radio: Volume 2*. Larrikin, CD, LRH 430. [Series: Warren Faye Presents Yesterday's Australia] ('Cricket-isms').

**NB:** Several agreements between Hanna and Columbia Gramophone (Australia) Pty Ltd are held in the Pat Hanna Collection. These include details regarding royalties. The letters are dated 8 January 1934 (re. 'Pat Hanna Discourses on Racing' and 'Cricketisms'), which records a 2d per record royalty offer, and a 1953 agreement (re. 'The Gospel According to Cricket' and 'The Gospel According to Racing') for a 5 percent royalty rate.



### **FURTHER RESEARCH**

Colligan, Mimi. "[Hanna, George Patrick \(Pat\)](#)." ADB: 9 (1983), 86.

Djubal, Clay. "[Hanna, Pat](#)." *AustLit* (2007).

Fotheringham, Richard. "Laughing it Off: Australian Stage Comedy After World War I" (2010).

Pat Hanna Collection, The. Victorian Performing Arts Centre Museum, Melbourne (PACM).

Ian Hanna Collection. State Library of Victoria (Papers: Box 3639/4-9). [Incl. manuscripts, papers, correspondence, press cuttings, and newsletters relating to Pat Hanna]

Last updated: 10/11/2012

Expanded and Updated from the 2007 AustLit entry

**NB: The URL for this PDF will change each time it is updated. If you wish to cite or link to this record please use the following:**

Australian Variety Theatre Archive • <http://ozvta.com/entrepreneurs-g-l/>