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MY TURN CHARLES PINNING

# The avant garde of the backyard

A recent ad for something called the Newport Outdoor Film Series reminded me that my childhood was not solely a medieval horror show of spankings and more subtle tortures. It was also imbued with moments of the avant garde. Film and children are eminently well-suited to taking a healthy whack at the status quo.

Startling and immediate, both can leave us speechless.

In the 1950s and early '60s my Navy officer father was stationed on several ships in Newport. In the officer's wardroom they screened movies, and before the film had to be returned he would sometimes bring it home and we'd have movie night in the backyard.

Neighbors were invited and we put out folding canvas chairs and chaise lounges, and some people brought their own. There was iced tea and Narragansett Beer and ginger-ale and snacks.

We watched "Shane" and "Gone With the Wind." That night it was going to be "Around the World in 80 Days."

My father set up his big projector, swinging open the arms and snapping the take-up reel into place.

Then he removed the film reel from the round metal canister, both reels as big as the steering wheel on our Pontiac station wagon, and snapped it onto the other arm.

Then came the careful threading of the film between the rollers and onto the take-up reel.

The screen, its surface pearlescent and surprisingly abrasive, was set up in front of our huge, globular Japanese cherry tree.

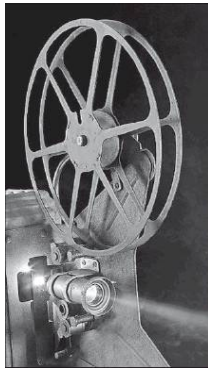
It was turning darker now, and the kids' running around began to slow, the chatter of the adults grew softer and sound of the crickets in the field behind the cherry tree began to rise up.

My father's voice: "All right everyone. The movie is about to begin!"

I sat down in my canvas chair. Connie Hayes, who lived next door and had one of Newport's foremost Barbie doll collections, sat to my right, and to my left, Chrissie Blank, a bonnie little tomboy with bangs. They were my best friends.

And suddenly it began, the mechanical clicking and flutter of the celluloid winding its way at 24 frames per second through the projector's sprockets and the cone of light splitting the darkness, carrying the image to the screen, first the leader countdown flashing the numerals with a beep for each: 5 ... 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1...And then!

I'd never been out of the United States, and leaned



forward to meet Victorian fustbudget Phileas Fogg and his exotic valet, Passepartout. Beginning in London, they made the wager and readied themselves for their journey around the world — first stop, Paris. Paris!

Where they climbed into the basket of a colorful hot air balloon with streamers. Up they went, floating above the most beautiful city I'd ever seen. As they sailed over France, they crossed the Alps and Passepartout leaned over and scooped an armload of snow off a mountain peak.

It was at that moment, timing perfect, that a little gust of wind rose up and the screen blew over!

Suddenly, there was Phileas Fogg and Passepartout in their hot air balloon sailing across our cherry tree, leaving behind the screen's confines.

We sat transfixed, and in the half minute before my father was able to right the screen, nobody complained. We were being transported someplace we'd never been before, discovering by accident a new way of seeing.

And isn't that just the way life is? By trying something just a little different, getting the film projector outside on a summer evening, the stage was set for a gust of wind to usher in a movie projected against a tree.

And what could have been more perfect than the image to be a hot air balloon in the sky?

Our faces were aglow and we were letting go, living the free life with Phileas Fogg and Passepartout. Living our cutting-edge life in little Newport many decades before the avant garde began projecting video against buildings and yes, trees.

There we were in the season that favors accidents, racing at the speed of light into the future.

— Charles Pinning, of Providence, is a novelist and an occasional contributor.