

Hollywood Came to Santa Cruz: Huge Redwoods Seen as Western Backdrops

By Ross Eric Gibson

Santa Cruz's towering redwoods helped attract the fledgling movie industry to town and served as the backdrop for some of the first westerns to portray cowboys as good-hearted, chivalrous pioneers.

Movies were only a penny arcade novelty in April 1896 when Thomas Edison debuted his projected "filmstrip" motion pictures in New York. Remarkably, this same show came to Santa Cruz only eight months later, thanks to Edison's friend, Major Frank McLaughlin of Beach Hill. In the next decade, nickelodeons sprouted like mushrooms, with 10 in Santa Cruz and four in Watsonville. The films were interspersed with live vaudeville acts. The movie-making business soon set up shop in Santa Cruz.

In April 1910, "Bronco Billy" Anderson came to town with his studio in a boxcar. Anderson felt the East Coast depiction of pasty-faced stage cowboys against painted outdoor backdrops cheated the film medium, which was capable of filming real cowboys against authentic western scenery. Anderson, a ranch-hand from Colorado, formed Essanay Studios in Chicago and Los Angeles. He came to Santa Cruz in search of redwood settings, and in one year he filmed 31 westerns along the railroad between Felton and Los Gatos. Anderson's romantic depiction of good-hearted cowboys has become the standard used ever since. He left the following year to establish the Niles area of what is now Fremont as the film center of Northern California.

Fred Swanton, who built the boardwalk, felt Santa Cruz should have actively lobbied to have Essanay make Santa Cruz the industry's permanent home. Indeed, 1911 saw Selig Film Co. arrive to film several westerns in Santa Cruz and at Cowell Ranch. The movie makers' demand for local scenery was there, it only needed to be encouraged.

For an ace promoter like Swanton, movies were the ideal promotion. They reached the masses, romanticized local scenery, attracted tourists, and left no environmental scars. Movies also justified picturesque civic improvements to enhance the tourist and filmmaking industries. Swanton brought several directors to Santa Cruz, including Cecil B. DeMille and Thomas Ince, and while they failed to locate here, they later filmed movies in the area. Over the next three years, Swanton had numerous local items filmed as travelogue filler for West Coast movie houses.

San Francisco's "Calif. Motion Picture Corp.," known as Cal. Pic., was founded in 1914 to film literary works of West Coast authors. To Swanton's delight, its first movie, Bret Harte's "Salomy Jane," was filmed near Boulder Creek and opened to national acclaim. Cal. Pic. was so pleased that director George Middleton bought up land around Boulder Creek and built a permanent gold rush town back lot where other Harte epics were filmed.

In 1916 with the aid of mayor Fred R. Howe, Swanton sought chamber of commerce support to help establish a studio on city land in upper De Laveaga Park. The company that came was Fer Dal, owned by Edward Ferguson and W.D.

Dalton. The company built studios and an outdoor stage to take advantage of natural lighting. The public watched filming and construction of giant sets from behind a wire fence. The studio also established De Laveaga Zoo as a home for animals used in filming. This included a herd of buffalo for westerns. Years later the zoo would remain after the studio closed.

A fourth studio came in 1917 when Fer Dal became home to Robards-Reid Co. They produced feature-length dramas on timely issues such as women's suffrage and child labor. But after World War I, Santa Cruz and Boulder Creek studios were vacant, although they were leased to visiting filmmakers.

In 1920, Swanton had a stroke of luck when Theodore Wharton, veteran of Edison and Essanay studios, and founder of "Pathe American," established a studio in Santa Cruz. His Pacific Avenue headquarters was upstairs in what was Bookshop Santa Cruz before the 1989 quake.

Swanton also brought two studios to the boardwalk in 1923. The Boardwalk Theatre became studios for Bert Tracy Comedies, and the roller-skating rink became studios for Santa Cruz Productions. The latter was noted for transforming Natural Bridges Beach into a tropical isle, with palm trees and grass huts, for the film, "Hands Across the Sea."

The era of seven locally based studios was short-lived, but up to 1926, more than 100 movies were filmed here, with 85 percent of them depicting historic settings. Yet Swanton's vision of a "Hollywood in the Redwoods" was not lost. Even without the studios, Santa Cruz backgrounds have appeared in nearly 100 films since 1926.



Filming "Thunder Mountain". Paradise Park, 1924.

Sources

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