Us Folks on the Film: A California Mountain Town that has Gone Stark Movie-Mad

By Earle Snell

[Earle Snell was the screenwriter for several of the films shot in Boulder Creek—Editor]

For almost a score of years the town had slumbered in obscurity--and blessed contentment. Sometime before that, it had been a slumbering metropolis with a sawdust ozone, "Whiskey Row," pay days and the red tinged nights that follow. But as the trees fell and were converted into marketable commodity and the sawyers and lumber-jacks moved gradually back and back, like a receding tide, the town was left as high and dry and almost as much forgotten as a deserted island. Even the multitude of summer-resortists that every year flood the Santa Cruz Mountains broke, as on a rock in mid-stream, flowed on either side and completely surrounded but at the same time almost as completely avoided the place. True, a few took bed and meals at the Boulder Creek House, but they were of the sedentary type which looks only for quiet and repose--for late breakfasts and the early drone of beetles to call them to bed. Possibly they might dangle a fish line in the stream that babbled past the hostelry's back door, but by no more strenuous exercise did they disturb the community in its chronic siesta.

Then came the great awakening. A "movie" company, headed by Beatriz Michelena, invaded the peaceful canyon, took boisterous possession of its hotel and otherwise profaned the sacredness of its ingrown solitude, and all for the sake of translating Bret Harte into motion picture film. Cowboys, be-spurred and sombreroed, veterans all of a hundred rodeos, mounted their outlaw broncos, and bucked their perilous ways down Boulder Creek's main thoroughfare. There were the loud bawlings of the director though the megaphone, the frantic inroads of the "prop" boy in this search--by either purchase, lease, or theft--of properties, and the syncopated explosion of blank cartridges. For a moment, at least, the town, taken unawares, figuratively rubbed its eyes and blinked its astonishment. Then enthusiastically it fell in with this strange but exciting new order of things.

Having witnessed this original inoculation of the town with film bacilli, one comes back after a period of three years to marvel at the extent of the epidemic's growth. Following the trail blazed by the first invader, other motion picture "outfits" swarmed in upon the town and trifled with its emotions. They cajoled and flattered it and balancing soft words against hard cash, magnanimously invited its inhabitants to be in the pictures. Thus the townsfolk were privileged to bask in the resplendent presence of some of the very greatest. William Hart came here to film *The Aryan*, and Douglas Fairbanks *The Halfbreed*. Here Mary Miles Minter got atmosphere for her *Melissa of the Hills* and Mary Pickford for *The Romance of the Redwoods*. *Freckles* with Jack Pickford

and Louise Huff as the stars was done here; also *Sudden Jim* with Charles Ray, *The Sunset Trail* with Vivian Martin and *The Call of the East* with Sessue Hayakawa. [October 6, 2001: According to W. Lee Cozad, film historian with the Rim of the World Historic Society, *Call of the East* was shot entirely in the Big Bear area of the San Bernardino Mountains.-Editor] There has been a horde of others, of the great, and near great, each attracted here by the same indefinable something, worshiped obsequiously by all true devotees of the shrine of Art and called atmosphere--in this case atmosphere of the untamed West, to be found here in unlimited abundance.

When one speaks abstractly of mountain atmosphere he thinks more or less concretely of cliffs and trees and canyons and booming waters. It was something like this that the producers had first in mind when they turned their faces toward the Santa Cruz Mountains--and toward Boulder Creek in particular. They soon learned that the atmosphere has also its human element, the most important and interesting part of it. Call it the human atmosphere as distinguished from the natural. The theory of its development is based on the proposition that sour dough, bear grease and other exigencies of the hills can round out a better mountaineer before the camera or elsewhere, than all the crepe hair, grease paint and similar artifices of theatrical "make-believe."

When the producers found this out they began calling upon Boulder Creek's permanent citizenship for their backwoods types, and this same citizenship fell into line with remarkable agility. To give true cast to its new identity, it began to develop within itself professional jealousies, and thus, by a brand universally recognized, became an established part of the great motion picture fraternity.

They say that in days ago the high event of the town was the annual horseshoe pitching contest between Judge Page and Mr. R.J. Hand. But that is all but forgotten now in the keener struggle between the two for premier picture acting honors. Fate has conspired in more ways than one to set these two most ancient of the "boys" against each other in monumental rivalry. The Judge, then just grown into his first pair of long jeans, arrived in San Francisco in 1849. The following year came Mr. Hand, who was but six years of age and just started in his primer. The Pages came around the Horn and the Hands across the Plains. It is still a question of open and evidently indeterminable debate whether it was the Judge missed the more by seeing naught of the burly bison, the war-painted Indian and the rattlesnake that lived in the same hole with ground-owls and prairie-dogs, or Mr. Hand through catching no glimpses of whales, porpoises and suspicious appearing crafts that might have carried pirates. Both came to Boulder Creek at a very early day and saw the town grow from "when it warn't no more'n a blacksmith shop and a turn in the road" to its present dimension. That blacksmith shop gave rise, no doubt, to the pitching of improvised quoits, at which the two men became as keen rivals as in pioneer prestige.

In the late sixties Page was elected Justice of the Peace for the township, and the heavy duties of that office anchored him permanently to the spot. He has not visited San Francisco since 1869 when Montgomery Street was the waterfront, and, although some time since retired from office, "reckons" he has no time to the visit the city now. It perturbed him mightily when he learned from me that I had been considerably in San Francisco of recent years and know nothing of Tom Murphy, the gunsmith. "Tom knew nigh everybody," he explained, "and I reckon the poor boy must be dead er you would have met up with him some time er ruther."

Once during his younger days Mr. Hand also basked momentarily in public prominence when, as he himself declares, he drank one glass of sour claret too many and forgot to appear for jury duty in the most important case ever booked on Judge Page's calendar. The Judge, who was still young in experience and possibly not as well up as he afterwards became on some points of law, saw no way out of the difficulty other than to dismiss

the case. Thus it happened that the rightful ownership of a certain and many times "said" Berkshire shoat, the object of the proposed litigation, was never decided. This disrespect for the dignity of the court, together with its flagrant miscarriage of justice, has ever since been a sore point with the Judge for which he holds Mr. Hand in the first instance responsible. It was to even up the humiliation of it, so local tradition says, that he first went into training to wrest the horseshoe pitching championship laurels from the delinquent juryman's brow.

A rivalry thus nurtured through many years was still further aggrandized by the advent of motion pictures to Boulder Creek. Among the first of the local talent recruited by Beatriz Michelena were the ex-Judge and the once profligate, but long since reformed, Mr. Hand. Even in those first pictures it was a question for heated argument to determine which of the two made the greater contribution to the screen. Both men had beards, almost equally long and equally white. The Judge, however, had hair that tumbled to his shoulders (whereas Mr. Hand's was shorter cropped) and his pipe was the longest, largest and oldest in Santa Cruz County--and strongest, too, although this last named attribute was ruled out as non-registering and therefore ineffective on the screen. To offset the advantages thus accumulated in the Judge's favor, Mr. Hand's adherents pointed to "Old Brass," an ancient muzzle-loading musket of amazing length and "heft," which their screen favorite carried across the crook of his arm. It is a redoubtable instrument of slaughter, passed from father to son through a succession Hands that must date back almost to the discovery of gunpowder.

However, as later events proved, all this preliminary and acrimonious argument but served to set the stage for the full fury of the professional rivalry that blazed forth when Mary Miles Minter invaded the Santa Cruz mountains to film *Melissa of the Hills*. It was a Kentucky feud story with the Allisons and the Watts the warring clans. A malevolent fate ordained that the producer should choose Mr. Hand to be the great-grandfather of the Allisons, and Judge Page to occupy a similar patriarchal position with the Watts. As the story developed the hoary-haired leaders of the two factions fell more and more in with the antagonistic spirit of it, until, when the picture came to its close with one of the "bing-bang" battles that give the man in the orchestra an opportunity to use all his instruments of blood-curdling noise, the beards of the two ancient rival almost bristled with fury as they led their respective clansmen to the conflict. The slaughter would undoubtedly have been as stupendous in reality as the director had planned in make-believe, had “Old Brass" been loaded with anything more than powder and wadding and opposing artillery with ball cartridges.

These two notables are at the pinnacle of Boulder Creek's picture profession. There are a number of lesser lights, however, that outshine the masses enough to command passing notice. There is "West-Side" Jack, so called because his nose crooks toward the west side of his face with a peculiar twist that must have been achieved some time in the past through sudden impact with an object of high resistance. It is this same twist of the nose and an individuality of beard that recommend him for pictures. When not engaged with his histrionic pursuits, Jack, in consummate metaphorical irony, drives the town water-wagon. He makes the boast that he is the "black sheep" of a highly respectable family and quotes as evidence that he has a strain of ancestral virtue in his veins, the fact that he once walked the length of "Whiskey Row," when Boulder Creek was still in the hey-day of her prosperity and excesses, three times without "stopping in" to take a drink.

Texas George is another of the prize products of the screen craze that has swept the town. Before Beatriz Michelena came with her cowboys to set things "topsy-turvy," he earned an unpretentious living blacking shoes, with prospects of someday becoming a barber. But the romance of cowboying got into his blood, and although, without horse or saddle, he, like the man who begins his motoring career by buying a pair of goggles, saved his dimes and purchased a complete vaquero's wardrobe, including sombrero, high-heeled

boots, gauntlets and a screaming bandana that he knots artistically under his chin through a drilled celluloid dice. Once in the outfit, he has never put it off, unless it be at night when no one is looking. It is all done in the approved "movie" style and he is a truly picturesque figure when strutting along the sidewalk (I have seen him but once on horseback) exceedingly tall and exceedingly thin, with a boyish face and boyish mustache that curls like corn silk on his upper lip.

Constable Tom Ladd, called "Sheriff" by courtesy, also commands a generous share of the township's motion picture honors. He has not the chin piece of the stock "con-sta-bule" burlesqued on the stage, nor his exaggerated star and pigeon-chested importance. On the contrary, he is a lean, lank man-hunter, with just the suggestion of a stoop and drooping mustache that has grown gray in the service. When leading a make-believe posse into the hills against make-believe outlaws, he looks every whit the human bloodhound as he rides past the camera.

Scene from "Just Squaw," 1917

[The photograph to the left is a scene from *Just Squaw*, 1917. The adults are actors Beatriz Michelena and Andrew Robson. The two little girls were local children, Anne Locatelli (l.) and Shirley Cress Gleason (r.) Their mothers made new dresses for the girls to wear in the film; but the director wanted the dresses to appear old and dirty so he smeared mud on them. The bandage on Anne Locatelli's foot is there for a genuine reason. She had hurt her foot several days prior to the shooting.-Editor]

[The original of this photograph belonged to Anne Locatelli. This copy is from the Barbara Giffen collection, History Archives, Museum of Art and History at the McPherson Center, Santa Cruz, California. It is the property of the Museum of Art and History and may not be used in any way without the express permission of the owner. Used here with permission.]

Little Dante Locatelli, eight years of age, but with all the swager and self-dependence of a man, stands alone in Boulder Creek in his utter disdain for pictures and picture acting. Like David Warfield, he remained steadfast in his refusal to appear before the camera until forced into it through the combined coercion of his father and school teacher. One whole day he sulked under protest through the scenes, playing the role of halfbreed son of "Tennessee" Jones, the squawman in Beatriz Michelena's *Just Squaw*, and by evening-fall had reached a point in the story where he was carrying an armful of wood into the squawman's shack. The next day the action was to be caught up again with the interior scene showing the little half-breed coming on through the door and into the room with his burden of fuel. But when the morrow arrived Dante, who had failed to honor his father's board at the breakfast hour, had disappeared as from the face of the earth. Producing activities were called to a halt and the producing cast converted into a searching party. Before noon the entire town had joined in the hunt, but the youthful Thespian was not to be found. Finally in desperation the producer seized upon Dante's brother Frank, but one year the former's junior, and hurried him to the squawman's hut to take his brother's place. But Frank, too, harbored a strain of artistic temperament whereby he preferred a cowboy to an Indian role. It looked for a time as if the scenario would have to somehow be changed to satisfy this prejudice, when the property man, with a spark of genius, brought out a gaudily painted bow and arrow as the clinching argument in favor of the Indian role. The next day it was found that Dante, the original impersonator the squawman's offspring, had risen with the chickens, done a marathon up the Bear Creek road and taken refuge in the Japanese tie camp, ten and a half miles out of town.

Today Boulder Creek, from the ragamuffin urchin on the street to the most ancient "gray-beard," is "camera-broke." It prides itself immensely on its motion picture vocabulary. It knows a "cut," a "still" and a "retake" as unmistakably as it does its neighbor's dog, and irredeemably ostracized is he of its citizenship, who knows not enough, when in a scene, to keep his eyes from looking into the camera's lens. It speaks of "Doug" and "Bill" and "Mary" with easy familiarity and in a manner suggestive of a secret intimacy between itself and the great ones in the profession.

Source

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