

Early Film Studios in Santa Cruz County

By Ann Young

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I. "Moving the Movies to Santy Kruz"*

"Other arts...have been communal, focusing the energies, hopes, and beliefs of many. But the art of film would be vastly public, and have the public as its patron. Its future was full of mystery and of promise suggested in the early twentieth century, when it suddenly became the most popular American art. The "movies" (which entered our written language about 1912) recreated all the world's dimensions with bold abandon."

Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Creators*

In the 1910's and '20's, audiences around the world were both mesmerized and thrilled by a new technology that put pictures in motion. Fascination with the medium's novelty, its apparent magic, created a nearly insatiable appetite for movies. For many fledgling studios, speed of production was thus often of the essence. The fact that a film's content might suffer as a result of this was generally overlooked by eager theater patrons anxiously awaiting the newest releases. As Richard Koszarski remarks in his book, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915 - 1928*, there was often little financial incentive to produce quality films:

"During the 1915 - 1928 period, the experience of viewing a film was far different from what it would be at any time before or since. Exhibitors considered themselves showmen, not film programmers. The feature motion picture was only one part of their evening's entertainment, supplying about 68 percent of the total "attraction," according to one 1922 exhibitors' poll. Indeed, 24 percent of theater managers in this survey found that it made absolutely no difference at the box office whether the feature attraction was any good or not" (p.9).

With its relative proximity to Los Angeles and its rugged scenic beauty, Santa Cruz County soon attracted the attention of Hollywood producers who were eager to film westerns as quickly and efficiently as possible in natural settings. By the mid 1910's local redwoods had already become a favorite backdrop for cowboys, sheriffs' posses and their horses. Awed by the appearance of familiar scenery - and sometimes even faces - on the screen, Santa Cruzans' fascination with film grew even greater. Becoming a part of the production seemed to increase rather than diminish the magic and, as savvy businessmen such as Fred Swanton quickly realized, it had the added benefit of bringing money into the local economy. And while playing host to visiting crews of cameramen, actors and actresses from Hollywood studios was certainly nice, it soon became clear that having a studio - or perhaps even an entire network of them - located right here in Santa Cruz County would be even better. Armed with unbridled optimism for the future of this new "industry" and the benefits it might bestow on their city, civic leaders worked diligently over the next decade to attract studios to Santa Cruz County. The success they achieved was ultimately short-lived, but as local newspaper articles of the day recall, their efforts gave Santa Cruz a place in early motion picture history.

*This was the title of a burlesque staged by Santa Cruz' Fer Dal Film Company at their "Movie Ball" given at the Casino on May 6, 1916. [*Santa Cruz Daily Surf*, April 22, 1916, p.2]

II. The Beginnings: A Western Pioneer Village

"Secure in the fastness of the forest primeval a short mile above Boulder Creek, guarded against the intrusion of thoughtless "visitors" and the distractions of the city, the California Motion Picture Corporation has established and built up a motion picture town and studio."

Santa Cruz Daily Surf, February 16, 1915

In February, 1915 California Motion Picture Corporation director George Middleton invited "Surf" reporter James P. Leonard for a tour of the permanent new movie set his company was constructing near Boulder Creek. The resulting article painted a detailed picture of the gold rush village which soon came to be known locally as "Poverty Flat" (named, aptly, for the first picture to be shot there, a cinematic rendition of several Bret Harte poems). The village, built near the site where Middleton had earlier filmed the much-acclaimed "Salomy Jane," consisted of "a dozen log and shake cabins, with its usual quota of saloons, general merchandise stores, conspicuous among them being the post office and overland stage headquarters" (*SC Surf*, February 16, 1915). An assortment of horses, burros, mules, chickens, and ducks wandered the set, thereby adding to the general atmosphere of the place.

Most of the filming was done from a large, high platform constructed at one end of the town, but Leonard noted with great interest that, due to certain innovations, interior shots were also being made on location. By constructing "shells" of cabins and draping white sheets over the missing roof and fourth wall, the company's photographers were able to achieve light which was properly diffused for catching interior details on film. This was important for it allowed the studio to be more self-contained, encouraged the company to keep a greater number of employees at the site, and, of course, sped up the production process. This sense of urgency was also reflected in the fact that the studio was in the process of building a "laboratory" for developing the pictures which had just been taken. Leonard remarks: "This [the laboratory] is being installed in order that no time will be wasted between taking and releasing the pictures. The proofs will be shown at Boulder in the company's private auditorium" (*SC Surf*, February 16, 1915).

During filming, at least, this small "village" in Boulder Creek must have been a bustling place. Leonard reported that the California Motion Picture Corporation kept 75 to 80 people on its regular payroll for the creation of "The Lily of Poverty Flat." At times as many as 100 people were involved in the work. While the studio in Boulder Creek continued to be used intermittently over the next 10 years (films such as "Broken Chains," "Ten Ton Love," and a remake of "Salomy Jane" were all filmed there in the 1920's), it never grew to have the permanence or prominence that both its founders and local promoters had originally envisioned.



Lily (Beatriz Michelena) in front of her father's store on the main street of Poverty Flat

III. The Establishment of the DeLaveaga Park Studio

"What is known as a movie studio is a real imitation town; if such a term is permissible. Much money is spent in equipment, more money for salaries of actors. It is possible to build a motion picture studio in "any old place," but natural scenery suitable for dramatic backgrounds and sunshine to permit of continuous photography are rare. [...] If the real truth concerning the all-the-year round climate of Santa Cruz was generally known, and if the scenic possibilities of the country that lies between the Pajaro and the Pescadero, between the summit and the sea, were known, there would be an invasion of film makers into this region."

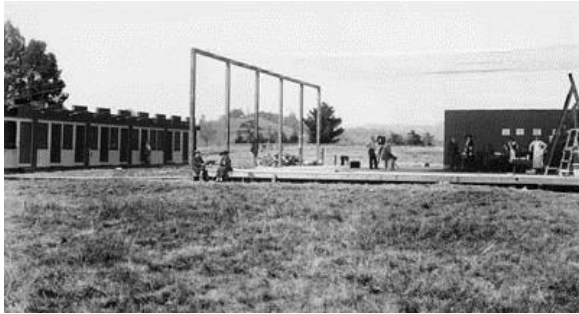
Santa Cruz Daily Surf, January 13, 1916

Barely a year after the construction of "Poverty Flat" near Boulder Creek, it appeared that Fred Swanton's efforts to bring the movie industry to Santa Cruz County were once again about to produce results. If he had not yet succeeded in actually bringing a studio to the city itself, he had at least kept the dream alive in the civic consciousness--a fact reflected in newspapers of the day. The writer of a January 13, 1916 editorial in the *Surf*, for example, extolled the virtues of this newest "big business" which consumed only sunshine and brought in turn "fabulous profits" from the free-spending "motion picture people." (Apparently unwilling to appear blindly enthusiastic, however, he quickly added: "They do not support schools or churches or lodges or pay taxes to any considerable extent. It is well to look squarely at these things"). Nevertheless, movie studios clearly offered, in the minds of some at least, a very real avenue to growth and prosperity for Santa Cruz.

As if in answer to this editorial plea, the *Surf* reported (just nine days later) that City Council was considering the requests of Edward Ferguson. Ferguson, then associated with the Universal Film Company, had expressed a strong interest in establishing a permanent studio in Santa Cruz. While his conditions for locating here seem to have been somewhat demanding ("50 acres, designated and selected by themselves," a 20 year lease, reduced tax rates, city water and lights, and various road improvements), they were apparently overshadowed by prospective fortune and fame. It was generally believed that one successful studio would lead to a second and then a third, until finally an entire network would arise; Santa Cruz would then be in a position to compete with Hollywood for major American film productions. Considered in this light, Ferguson's promise that "they will first establish one studio and after three months two more, and they will not produce less than one reel a week" (*SC Surf*, January 25, 1916) made a very favorable impression with Council members. On February 15, 1916 City Commissioners voted unanimously to lease a portion of DeLaveaga Park to Ferguson for \$1 a year.

The studio, named the Fer Dal Motion Picture Company after its two owners, Edward Ferguson and W. D. Dalton, wasted little time. Only three weeks after receiving City Council approval--and before the studio buildings were even completed--they began work on their first Santa Cruz production, a film entitled "The Tip." Local citizens gathered "by the hundreds" to watch as

actors and actresses played out their roles amongst familiar landmarks. The following month was apparently one of frenzied production for the Fer Dal studios, for an April 3, 1916 article in the *Surf* announced that the Princess Theater was to feature not just one, but several Santa



The film stage and, to the left, the dressing rooms

Cruz films: "At the same time Mr. Ferguson expects to show "The Tip," the first picture made in Santa Cruz by the Fer Dal company. He also hopes to complete their second picture, "The Call of The Pipe," in time to show it the same evening. The third picture made here, entitled "Welsh Rarebit and Pickles," is now going thru the laboratory and should be completed late this week."

Despite this fast start--or perhaps because of it--the Fer Dal studio evidently never produced a film that Universal found acceptable for distribution. Indeed, Ferguson and his business partners quit town even more quickly than they had arrived, leaving a trail of unpaid bills in their wake. By May of 1916, the studio was in the hands of Leon D. Kent, director, actor, and manager of the newly created Santa Cruz Motion Picture Company. In the course of the next month, he produced a number of two reel films, including "The Sea Urchin," "The Feud," and "Cindy Lane's Sacrifice." Reports in the *Evening News* praised Kent's films as being "novel, speedy and full of action"--in complete contrast "with the fault found in the previous company's productions" (May 16, 1916). The company survived only briefly, however, giving way in August of the same year to La Petite Film Company, financed by Dr. Charles Hadden Parker, a local dentist who used his family as cast and crew. When this too failed, Fred Swanton journeyed south and closed a contract with the Robards-Reid Company of Santa Paula. The company (which, readers were assured, had "produced 321 pictures without a single failure," *SC Surf*, January 29, 1917) moved into the Fer Dal studio where they produced a number of films--including "Mothers of Men." Over the next several years, the DeLaveaga Park studio was intermittently leased and used by a number of film companies: in 1919, for instance, the Santa Cruz Film Company used the studio to create "interiors" for the series of short comedies it was producing. While the DeLaveaga Park studio clearly did attract some film activity to Santa Cruz County, its success--both in cinematic production and ability to attract further studios--was limited. This brush with the film industry seemed only to have whetted Santa Cruzans' appetite for more, however. With the arrival of a new decade there were renewed hopes for the birth of a studio network in the city.

IV. The 1920's: Two Boardwalk Studios and Theodore Wharton

"I am in close touch with the motion picture industry. The south is going to be discarded by this line of work. The industry is "shot out," as they term it. In other words, they have used it so long that it is all pictured too many times. These people tell me that we have here the best location there is. What they need is a permanent studio, built by the city or by private enterprise and leased to any company desiring to use it."

Santa Cruz Evening News, April 15, 1920

Notes from a Chamber of Commerce Meeting

With the popularity of motion pictures rising quickly and a continuing flow of Los Angeles production companies travelling to Santa Cruz for location shots, the earlier attempts to establish studios in the city could optimistically and reasonably be viewed not as failures but as precursors to assured success. It was pointed out that recent technical advancements in the use of artificial lights could now compensate for Santa Cruz County's sometimes murky "atmospheric conditions"--a difficulty that had previously kept many studios in the sunny south. This, coupled with occasional encouragement from supposedly knowledgeable outside voices (Nick Cogley, an actor with the Will Rogers Motion Picture Company, gave a well-received talk to this effect at an Elks' entertainment in January, 1920), kept hope alive. It is no surprise, then, that city promoters continued to seek potentially lucrative contracts with film companies throughout the decade. All in all, the 1920's were to see three further serious attempts at bringing the movies to Santa Cruz.

In 1923, Fred Swanton, already a familiar figure on the Santa Cruz film scene, succeeded in bringing two studios to the Boardwalk. Tracy Productions, headed by comic actor Bert Tracy, was described by Preston Sawyer in an *Evening News* article as "an unassuming, yet energetic and progressive, newly-formed moving picture producing company" (August 25, 1923). Located in the Casino building, Tracy Productions employed a crew of Hollywood-experienced technicians and players to create a series of comedies which were released under the brand name "Lightening Comedies." The second Boardwalk studio, called simply "Santa Cruz Productions," won acclaim in local papers for its creation of a Tahitian village on Natural Bridges Beach (then known as Moore's Beach). Replete with thatched huts, artificially constructed palm trees, and "fifteen or twenty South Sea natives, dressed in native garb" (*SC Evening News*, February 17, 1923), this scene attracted great crowds of onlookers and served as the set for the filming of "Hands Across the Sea." Despite assurances that the 50 to 60 foot high palm trees were engineered to sway gently with the wind, the entire village was destroyed by a storm shortly after the filming had been completed.

By September 1925, newspaper accounts of negotiations to bring yet another studio to Santa Cruz began to surface. The Chamber of Commerce, chaired by Fred Garrison, met with Theodore Wharton of Los Angeles who was interested in using several acres of the Chamber's industrial sites at Twin Lakes for a motion picture studio. Although clearly eager to have a business of this sort in town, Chamber members were not unconditionally accepting; they in

fact voted against Wharton and "expressed very decided views against the use of the site by any persons who were not reasonably financed and ready to utilize the property for the purposes for which it was intended" (*SC Evening News*, September 28, 1925). Undaunted, Wharton Film Classics, Inc. instead negotiated the purchase of 20 acres of the Barrett tract near Wagner Park and "Horseback Hill." Wharton and his representatives then began a campaign to finance the promised facilities and equipment. In contrast to the studio at DeLaveaga Park, which was approved, constructed, and in operation within little over a month, Wharton's studio plans proceeded only slowly. Despite reports of organizational progress which appeared in the *Evening News* throughout 1926 and well into 1927, Wharton was apparently able to achieve little more than the establishment of offices here.

Although Santa Cruz County has played roles in a wide variety of films from the earliest days to the present, it never developed into the "Hollywood" once envisioned by civic leaders. The question then remains: why, despite so many apparent advantages, did a studio system fail to flourish here? While there may be no single answer to this question, it is not unreasonable to assume that studios were unable to survive in Santa Cruz for many of the same reasons they failed in other areas. The climate, while certainly mild--particularly in comparison to the East Coast cities from which the studios had originally migrated--was not as dry and sunny as it was in Southern California. And limiting days of outdoor production necessarily restricted profits. With increasingly elaborate sets being constructed on Hollywood lots, the need to travel was also lessened to a certain degree. In addition, many studios began to realize increased efficiency through centralization. Koszarski notes that as early as 1922 Hollywood produced 84 percent of all American films. Competition with such an extensive and established network was (and still is) difficult at best for small, independent studios. None of this, however, could entirely eliminate the need for location shooting. And while Santa Cruz was clearly not destined to become a center of American film production, its scenery provided--and will undoubtedly continue to provide--a colorful backdrop for many films.

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