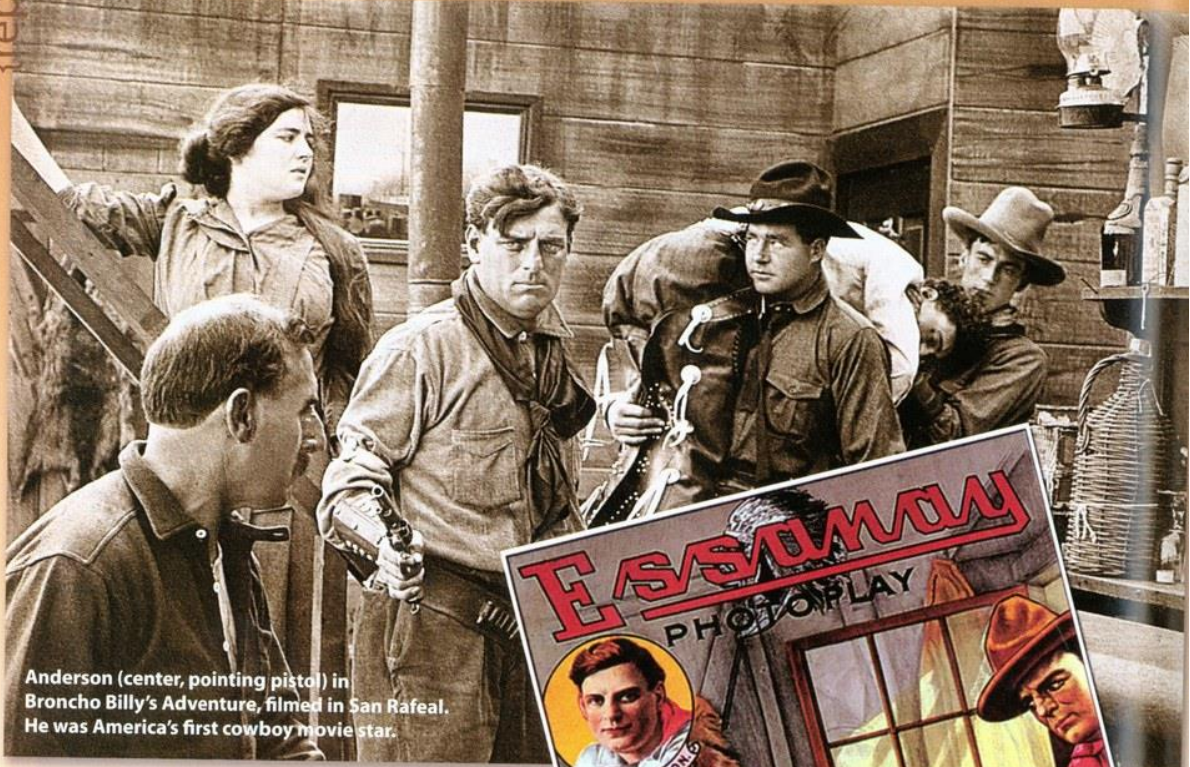


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BRONCHO BILLY'S LOST TRAIL

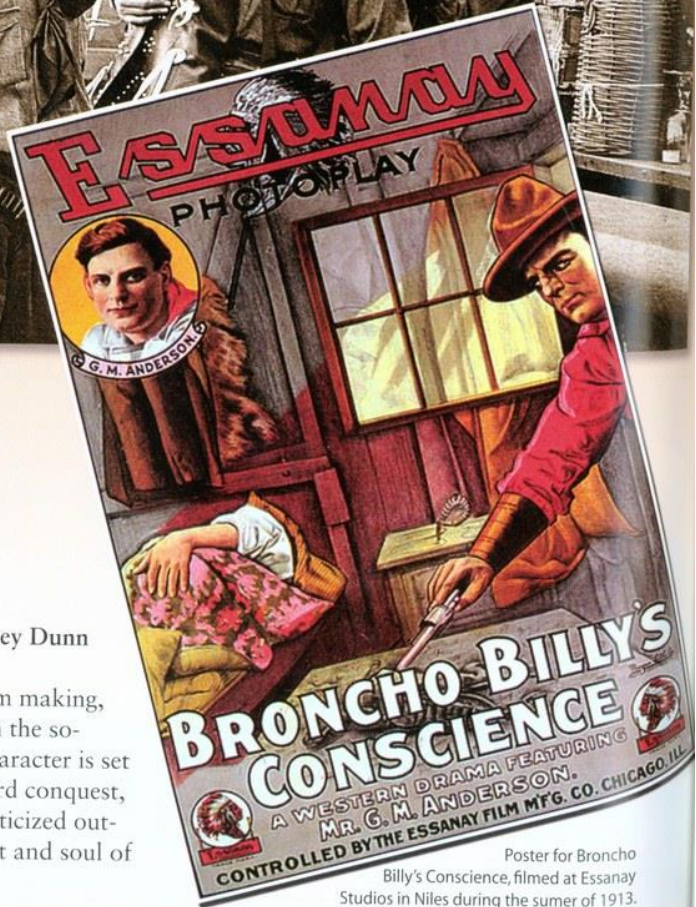


Anderson (center, pointing pistol) in Broncho Billy's Adventure, filmed in San Rafael. He was America's first cowboy movie star.

Gilbert M. "Broncho Billy" Anderson made early-day cowboy films in the Santa Cruz Mountains

By Geoffrey Dunn

Of all the genres central to American film making, none has played a more important role than the so-called "western," in which the American character is set against a 19th-century backdrop of westward conquest, often depicting idealized cowboys or romanticized outlaws in morality tales searching for the heart and soul of the continent.



Poster for Broncho Billy's Conscience, filmed at Essanay Studios in Niles during the summer of 1913.

Each generation of American film viewing audiences has savored its own rendition of the western—from *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) to *High Noon* (1952) to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) to Clint Eastwood's Academy-Award winning *The Unforgiven* (1992).

The Santa Cruz Mountains, it turns out, played a momentary role in this significant cinematic history.

It was along the rugged watershed of Los Gatos Creek Canyon—in the shadows of Loma Prieta—that Gilbert M. “Broncho Billy” Anderson, a pioneer figure in American film history and a legendary silent film star in the first two decades of the 20th Century, briefly situated a production company that played a pivotal role in the development of the American film industry.

“I don’t think people today fully comprehend the critical impact Anderson had in the early days of silent film,” says American film historian David Kiehn. “He did a great deal to establish the foundation of film production in the United States.”

In many respects, Gilbert M. Anderson was an unlikely prototype for the classic American cowboy.

Born in 1880 as Max Aaronson to Jewish parents, he was raised in Little Rock, Arkansas, before moving to St. Louis at the age of eight. Bitten with the acting bug at the age of 20, he changed his name and headed to New York City, hoping to find work on Broadway, but the only job he landed was in a minstrel show.

The motion picture business in the United States was in its incipient stage at the turn of century, as a small number of companies made short silent movies for weekly theatrical distribution. Characters in early shorts were said to “pose” in the films (not “act,” a term still limited to the stage), and Anderson, tall and handsome with a thick flock of hair, found “posing” work at the fledgling Edison Manufacturing Company in New York City.

In 1903, Anderson caught his first big break when he was cast in three roles for Edison’s *The Great Train Robbery*, directed by Edwin S. Porter and the first “western” ever produced. Anderson was originally hired for the film as a result of lying about his equestrian skills (he claimed to have been “born in the saddle”), but Porter,



Gilbert M. “Broncho Billy” Anderson

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American film historian

recognizing Anderson’s screen presence, kept him on.

When Anderson first saw the film screened at a Manhattan theater, he was overwhelmed by the response. “After it was over [the audience], in one acclaim, gave it a rousing, rousing reception,” he would recall in an interview late in his life. “And I said to myself: that’s it, it’s going to be the picture business for me.”

Anderson began writing, directing and producing films at a rapid rate. In 1907, he joined forces with Chicago entrepreneur George K. Spoor and formed The Essanay Film Production Company (“S” and “A”), thus commencing an amazing decade in which Anderson shaped the direction of American cinema.

Frustrated by both the inclement weather and the limitations of western scenery in Chicago, Anderson began a dizzying journey throughout the West for a location with both mild enough weather and an authentic western geographic backdrop to establish a permanent studio.

As historian Kiehn notes in his superb book, *Broncho Billy and the Essanay Film Company*, Anderson’s frenetic search took him first to Colorado then onward to California—Santa Monica, Pasadena, Santa Barbara—back to Colorado again, then Texas and back to Chicago. In the fall of 1910, Anderson headed west again, this time to the Santa Clara Valley (then known as the “Valley of Heart’s Delight”), intending to set up his production company in San Jose. Instead, he discovered the smaller village of Los Gatos ten miles to the south, nestled at the foot of the Santa Cruz Mountains, replete with a traditional western train station, hotel and general store.

By then, Anderson had fallen upon the character of “Broncho Billy,” a former cattle rustler who found redemption through good deeds. Anderson was to write, direct and star in a remarkable 148 Broncho Billy films over the next seven years. He was the first cowboy star in American movies.

One of the myths of local history is that Anderson and Essanay Studios actually filmed Broncho Billy scenes in Santa Cruz County. According to Kiehn, that didn’t happen. “I’ve never come across any evidence that Anderson filmed in Santa Cruz County,” says Kiehn. “Once Anderson settled on a site, the production company didn’t move very far.”

Where Anderson did film was the small rustic community of Alma (today covered by Lexington Reservoir just east of Highway 17), a few miles up the Los Gatos Creek Canyon and a train stop on the narrow-gauge South Pacific Coast Railroad. Anderson had ingeniously turned a railroad boxcar into a mobile production unit (including a dark room for developing his film), and he was able to park it on a spur near the Alma depot.

Anderson made more than a dozen films in Alma and Los Gatos—including *The Girl of the West*, *The Two Reformations* and *Carmenita the Faithful*—before leaving in February of 1911 for Redlands,



Photo: University of California Historical Photograph Collection.

[replay]

Alma, in Los Gatos Creek Canyon, provided a rustic backdrop for the Broncho Billy films. Today the site is covered by the Lexington Reservoir.

California, then Santa Monica, San Rafael, Lake Tahoe, Lakeside, and finally settling in Niles (now incorporated as Fremont), where he established a permanent studio.

Anderson continued his innovations in film production at Niles for the next four years. He signed Charlie Chaplin to a lucrative one-year contract in 1914—Chaplin directed *The Tramp* at Niles—and the two stars appeared together in *The Champion*, before Anderson sold his shares in Essanay and retired in 1916. *Broncho Billy* had ridden off into the sunset.

Anderson lived in virtual obscurity for the next 40 years, until his work was rediscovered in the 1950s and the Academy of Motion Pictures Academy awarded him an honorary Oscar for his contributions to the industry. He died, in Pasadena, in 1971. ♣

**Niles Essanay
Silent Film Museum**

Museum Hours -
Noon to 4 P.M. Saturday
Noon to 4 P.M. Sunday

For more info:
www.nilesfilmmuseum.org



Production of *The Tenderfoot Messenger* in Los Gatos, October 1910. Anderson (left, in white cap) used a prototype 35mm Bell & Howell camera, hand cranked by his trusted cinematographer Jess Robbins.