**Happenin’s ‘Round the House**

*Featuring the story and painting that go with the movie, The Toll Gate, shown at this year’s Silents Under the Stars*

*By Margi Bertram, Museum Administrator*

Some of you may be aware of the book, *Told Under a White Oak Tree*, authored by Bill Hart’s pinto pony and film co-star, Fritz. In this book, Fritz is remembering his life in film to his friends, Cactus Kate and Lisbeth. He recounts several of the stunts he performed with Hart. As he opens the book, Fritz comments about the Boss, “You know, he thinks he owns this ranch, but he doesn’t. Me and you and Lisbeth and Wolf, we own it, and by golly, we’ll run it too. What have I got to show for my seven years’ work in pictures – if we don’t own this place? …and I just want to tell you that this is Newhall, California, and right in the foothills, and land is worth something here.”

After taking a break from films for a few years, Fritz returned back to back in the films *The Toll Gate* and *Sand*. As the film to be shown this year at **Silents Under the Stars**, we thought it would be fun to review what Fritz wrote about one stunt in *The Toll Gate*, reproduced for his book in a painting by James Montgomery Flagg. This painting can be viewed in the Guest Wing of the museum. In this telling, Fritz also references the cinematographer, Joe August. We hear Fritz set the scene, which took place at a location outside Sonora, near the Sierras. We know this location is part of the Natural Bridges Trail in Calaveras County. This two-mile round trip hike takes you to spectacular limestone caverns, used for this action in the film.

“We was going up into the country what Bill likes, Snorer, or some such name as that. Anyhow, it’s in the foothills of the Sara’s mountains. I’m wrong on that name, too, but I’m doing the best I can on names…We found our river all right, and then I heard we was to get the water stuff.

“Then we went to our ‘Toll Gate’ location…It was a hole – a tunnel – or a sewer right through the mountain. You can call it what you like but that is what it was. It was about seventy-five or a hundred yards long. There was an overhanging cave where you went in and the same where you came out, and then it just narrowed down to a hole – just room for a horse to swim and a man to sit on him and not bump his head on the ceiling. It was about six feet wide at the water level. Bill, he looked at it a long, long time—longer than I ever see him look at any stunt before. Then he said, ‘Any ledges in there under water to upset a hoss?’ And Joe, the camera man, he said: ‘I took off my clothes and went through there yesterday on some planks lashed together and I sounded all the way through with a pole. It averages about eight feet deep ‘cept n one place, where there’s a hole, about forty feet long, where I couldn’t touch bottom at all.’ And Bill said, ‘Deepness don’t matter none, but do you strike any ledges gitting out of the hole?’ Joe, he said he didn’t think so. ‘Boys,’ said Bill, ‘this will be great for the story if we can git it. In this story this tunnel is the entrance to an outlaws’ cave, and there’s nine of us got to go through and carry pine-know torches n our free hand so Joe kin set up at the other end and have light to photograph us coming through.

“I swum all right, and pretty soon we hit a place where the water didn’t hit me so hard, but it kind of pulled me down in round whirligigs, and away at the other end I could see Joe on a ledge of rocks, grinding his camera. He didn’t look no bigger than a speck. And then all at once something happens that made me feel like death.

“My front feet hit a ledge of rock under the water, and I couldn’t find nothing behind to climb on. Right there I seen it coming. You know we hosses can scent danger and see our finish quicker than a man. I tried to climb. Right there I could see me a drowning the Boss…I got my front legs way up, and the boss, he was quarter riding way off on one side to steady me, but I had nothing under me but that whirlpool of water a-sucking me down.

“I struggled and struggled, but it wasn’t any good. And then I put everything I had into a mighty jump, but I couldn’t make it – it couldn’t be done, and over I come – right on the Boss – him staying right with me. The Boss has told me since then never to breathe under water. But I didn’t know it then, and as we went down and down, I just kicked and lunged. I was strangling when we come up. The Boss was still with me. How I didn’t strike him and kick him to death, I don’t know, but there he was with his hand through my cheek strap, trying to get my head above water. Oh! I am plumb ashamed of myself, now when I think of it. I plumb lost my head. I was crazy.

“I just dug into it and climbed like a wild hoss that I was.

“The Boss, he wasn’t there, but just in a second he come up, too, about ten feet away from me. I looked at him and tried to say, Good-bye, and I made a sound.

“And then the Boss said, ‘Now, old man, come ahead – come ahead’ – and I felt we was going toward the light, but I couldn’t see much. I seemed to be going blind, but I kept my feet working, and all at once I felt a lot of hands grab me, and I was outside, and I felt awful sick all over, but I see the Boss laying stretched out on the rocks and I pushed through the boys and tried to nose him. And then a terrible dizziness came over me and I felt like everything was going round and round, and I was falling, and a whole lot of hands grabbed me again, and the boys was bracing their bodies up against me, and the let me down easy aside the Boss.

“…and the Boss, he was down on his knees beside my head, and what do you think he was doing? – doggone if he wasn’t washing my mouth out with WATER and a sponge. Just like I hadn’t had enough of WATER. I got mad right there, and the Boss said, ‘Let him up, let him up,’ and up I come – and the madder I got, the Boss just kept laughing and laughing and doing a regular dance, and then he just hollered. ‘There’s life in the old boy yet’”

We hope you will join us at **Silents Under the Stars** on Saturday, August 11, and that you will take a moment to visit the Mansion before dinner, to take a close up look at the painting representing this exciting action – we’ll make sure to point it out!