Carmencita's Dance, a Film Feature of 1894.

FILMS PUT ON ICE FOR FANS YET UNBORN

Movies Deemed Peculiarly Worthy of Preservation Will Be Treated to Last Forever—Screen Cornerstones

By ALVA JOHNSTON

WILL HAYS has sent a call to the motion-picture companies to search their vaults for ancient films of all kinds and for news reels of possible historic interest. The most important of these are to be treated by a process developed in the Eastman laboratories for making films immortal. They will be placed in steel boxes and kept forever in a dry atmosphere, at a temperature of 40 degrees, for the benefit of historians and students, centuries hence.

The schoolboys of 3000 or 4000 A. D. may learn about us from the venerable news reels and dramas. Instead of reading corpulent volumes of history, they will troop to the school movie houses to hoot their forefathers and write exercises on "The Slow Motion Era" and "Factors That Retarded the Development of the Early Twentieth Century Brain."

Even so, it is pretty certain that distant ages will appreciate the courtesy of Mr. Hays and the motion-picture industry in setting aside these films for them. One of the most priceless relics of early English history, for instance, is the Bayeux tapestry, which is nothing more than a 231-foot news reel in needlework. It pictures the Norman Conquest in seventy-two scenes. Carefully preserved for nearly 900 years, it is today the great authority on the life and manners of that time. It is reasonable, therefore, to expect the future to prize miles of film showing the World War, tracing the development of the automobile, airplane, motion pictures and the radio, and picturing the social changes of the last three decades.

Only films that show history in the making are to be placed in cold storage. An important branch of modern history, however, is the history of the films itself. On this reasoning, the Smithsonian Institution has already collected some antique celluloids, including: Execution of the Chinese Boxers (made up and taken at Waukegan, Ill.), 1896; Star Pointer and Joe Patchen Race, 1897, and Destruction of the Spanish Fleet (from models), 1898.

Many early films are fading out and others are becoming warped and wrinkled, so that much of the best historical material of the last thirty years is in danger of perishing. The Hays plan for preserving them calls for the construction in the new Archives Building at Washington of steel vaults for 20,000 reels, with provision for expanding the capacity later to 50,000. Prints will be kept at the Congressional Library and issued for current use. The film output of each succeeding year will be canvassed for reels that should be preserved.

In the meantime the motion-picture companies have been ransacking their own archives. International Newsreel, for instance, has unearthed the only film ever taken of Grover Cleveland. It shows him riding with McKinley on the way to the latter's inauguration. Scenes of the San Francisco earthquake and fire, early flights of the Wright brothers, the first automobile races and shows are among the treasures brought to light. Pathé recently revived some of the earliest thrillers and comics, particularly featuring "The Great Train Robbery," first of the action pictures.

Edison has preserved pictures that date back more than thirty years and were shown originolly in the kinetoscope or nickel-in-the-slot peepshow machine before the art of projecting them on a screen had been developed. An Alexandrian library of materials has been collected by Terry Ramsaye in preparation for his "Million and One Nights," which will tell the history of motion pictures in complete detail.

Picking the films that are to live is a delicate task. Few know what the current public wants. Catering to the taste of posterity calls for some discrimination. There is danger of overestimating future interest in our Presidential inaugurations, treaty-signing parties and other solemn official shows. History is usually most concerned about things that are considered beneath the dignity of history. Posterity, with its usual impertinence, is sure to charge that the important films were thrown away and the trivial ones preserved.

Scholars will probably sigh for the lost comedies of Mack Sennett, as they now mourn the lost books of Livy. They will probably slight the silk-hatted ensembles of statesmen, the events historic and the pompous public occasions, while finding vast significance in the Valentino riots, the Peaches and Browning mobbings, the Charleston contests and hot dog eating tournaments.

Some of the historic films go back nearly two generations. Motion pictures of a sort had been made before 1888, but in that year Edison built the first true motion-picture camera. The first film star was John F. Ott, an employe in the Edison laboratories. Mr. Ott had several lines of comedy, but he was pre-eminent as a sneezer. The first movie comedy was the Ott sneeze. Authorities on broad comedy still hold that Mr. Ott's sternutations have never been improved on, although many leading comedians have distinguished themselves in this specialty. Ott's earliest interpretation of hay fever was made in 1888. Edison's invention was then in an experimental stage, however, and it was not until February, 1893, that Ott sneezed for posterity. At that date the first motion picture studio was completed by Edison. A picturization of one of Ott's supreme paroxysms has been preserved. As a cornerstone of motion-picture archaeology it seems practically sure of a home in the Archive Building. Immediately after this pioneer feature the following acts were shot:

Professor Batty's troupe of trained bears.

Mae Lucas, solo dancer of "A Gaiety Girl," then playing at Daly's.

Buffalo Bill.

Annie Oakley, famous as Little Sure Shot in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.

Mme. Bertholdi, a contortionist.

Eugene Sandow, the strong man.

A barber shop scene.

A Chinese laundry scene.

Two cock fights.

A bit from Hoyt's "A Milk White Flag."

A tooth-extracting operation.

These were all shown in the nickel-in-the-slot machines. Progress was being made in 1893 toward projecting the pictures on a screen for exhibition to audiences, but Edison could see no future for this, according to Mr. Ramsaye, who in his forthcoming book quotes the inventor as follows:

"If we make this screen thing that you are asking for it will spoi everything. We are making these peepshow machines and selling a lot of them at a good profit. If we put out a screen machine there will be a use for maybe about ten of them in the whole United States. With that many screen machines you could show the pictures to everybody in the country—and then it would be done. Let's not kill the goose that lays the golden eggs."

Three years later, however, Edison began to project the pictures on a screen. His opening occurred on April 20, 1896, at Koster & Bial's Music Hall in New York. The pictures were thrown on a twenty-foot sheet in a gilded Renaissance frame. One of the New York papers, which describes this marvel, carries in an adjoining column a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Asa Blackburn on the unscriptural aspects of the cycling craze, in which the clergyman said: "You cannot serve God and skylark on a bicycle."

At the very outset the infant industry had a stroke of luck. It accidentally hit on one of the great natural resources of the country. In the first year of its existence the screen discovered the kiss. That tender mannerism is now said to have a money value of about three billion dollars in American industry. The foundation of this branch of the national wealth was laid in the '90s by "The Great May Irwin-John C. Rice Kiss," which ran for fifty feet of film. A star today would feel that she was flouting her public if she permitted herself to be kissed in less than a hundred film feet; but thirty years ago the fifty-foot kiss was regarded as a tidal wave of carnality.

Press and pulpit were outraged.

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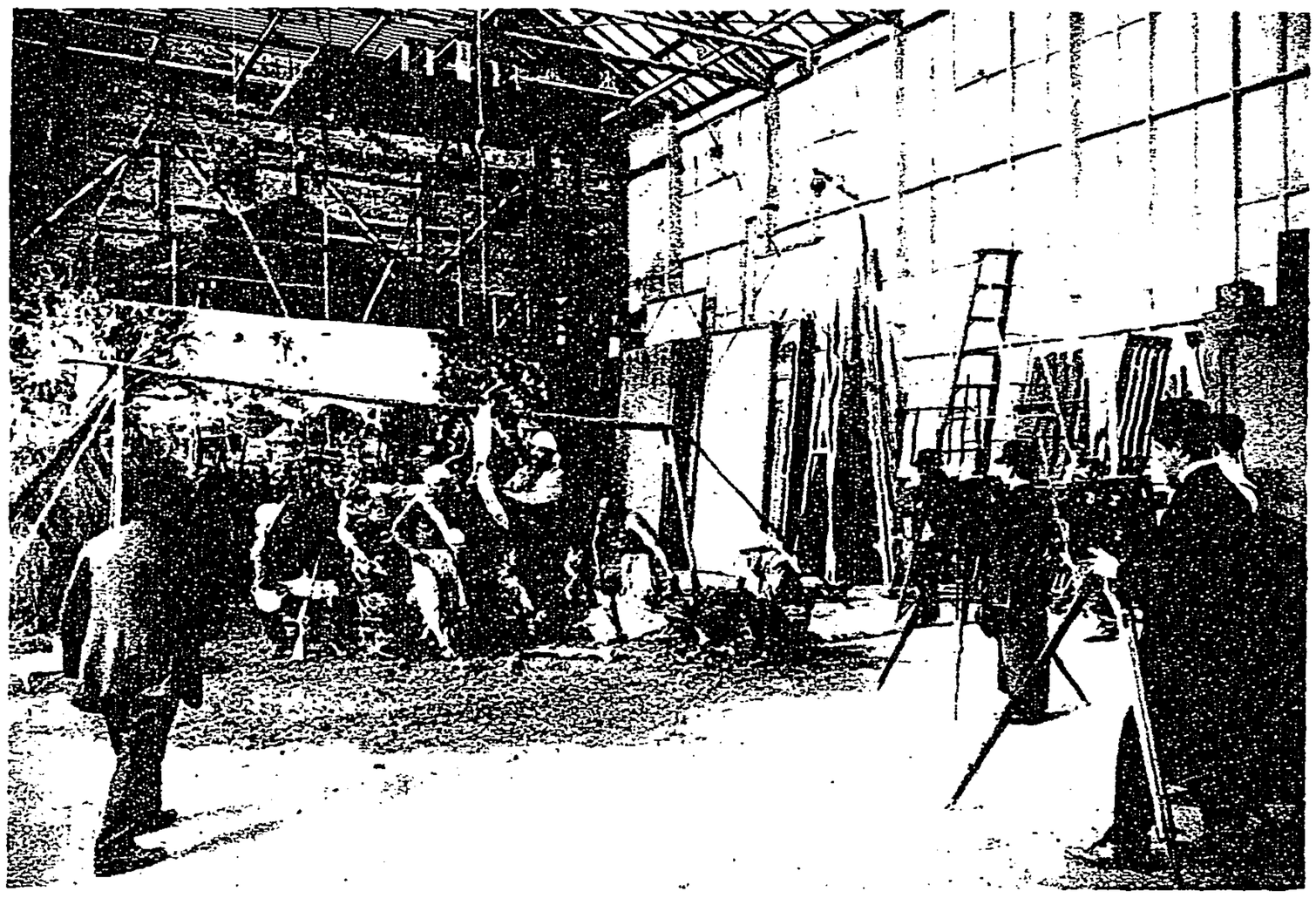

"Roosevelt in Africa," Shot in a Chicago Studio, Where Mr. Selig Made the Film Depicting T. R.'s Hunt.

The Sneeze of Fred Ott, the First Movie Comic, 1894.
Courtesy of Terry Ramsaye.

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FILMS FOR FANS YET UNBORN

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"Magnified to Gargantuan proportions and repeated three times over, it was absolutely disgusting," said one editorial. Mr. Ramsaye traces movie censorship to the outcry at that time. The Irwin-Rice kiss has been tenderly preserved and is a candidate for eternity.

Certain prizefight films are of genuine historical importance in the development of motion pictures. The Corbett-Courtenay fight in 1894 was, according to Mr. Ramsaye, the first instance of dramatic construction in the pictures. Jim Corbett, the world's champion, and Pete Courtenay agreed to deliver six rounds of fast, interesting boxing, ending in a spectacular knockout by Corbett. The pictures were first shown in peepshows. Later, after the projecting process was developed, they had a long career on the screen.

The Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight in Carson City on March 17, 1897, was a still more important milestone. Pictures of this fight gave the public its first appreciation of the power of the movie camera to record action vividly and accurately. A by-product of this fight was the first scenario—the fight by rounds as telegraphed from Reno to THE NEW YORK TIMES. The story of this first scenario gives a fair idea of the business tactics of the early producers.

First Movie Director

Film piracy is nearly as old as the films. The pirate bought or leased a film, manufactured duplicates and sold them. Enoch J. Rector, who filmed the Corbett - Fitzsimmons fight, used film of nearly double the standard width in order to prevent pirates from making prints.

But even this precaution did not enable Rector to protect his product. The day after the fight a producer had it re-enacted before the camera in New York by two freight-handlers. Holding in his hand THE NEW YORK TIMES round-by-round story of the fight, the producer took his position at the ringside and shouted: "Fitzsimmons leads right to jaw." The Fitzsimmons impersonator swung his right. "Corbett sidesteps." The pompadour stevedore shuffled out of range. "Fall into a clinch!" barked the producer, uttering for the first time what is now the director's most hackneyed command. For fourteen rounds the Carson City combat was imitated by the giant longshoremen. The films were speedily developed and went on the New York market four days ahead of the authentic films.

The great figure of the early news reels was Theodore Roosevelt. The Roosevelt films run into an incredible mileage. Still, it is possible that in the distant future some specialist in celluloid archaeology will have a thrill in discovering "Hunting in Africa," a curious bit of pseudo-Rooseveltiana. "Hunting in Africa" was shot in a Chicago studio while the ex-President was hunting along the Equator. Palms, tall grasses and tropical backdrops were set up. Rex, a lion who had been on the stage long enough to become an honorary member of the White Rats, was led into the potted Dark Continent, and the highest-priced Roosevelt impersonator in vaudeville engaged to stalk him.

Looking like Teddy was an important profession at that time. Vaudeville's demand for square-built men with conspicuous teeth was at its height. The artist engaged for this Roosevelt act, however, had one defect in his equipment as a big-game hunter. He had never fired a rifle. A dummy weapon was placed in his hands and a marksman of the Marine Corps hired to shoot from the wings. The act was rehearsed until the lion had learned to cue in with a roar and a shake of the mane at the approach of the massive figure in khaki. When the time came for the big scene, however, a mishap occurred. The marine was supposed to bring down the lion with one bullet, but he merely grazed the neck. Rex chased his co-star up a scaffolding and clawed Africa to shreds.

On a later date, however, the jungle was reassembled and the faked hunt successfully pictured. The producer's conscience, however, had no standing abroad. When Roosevelt on his return from Africa visited Berlin, the pictures of the execution of the big cat in Chicago were played there to great houses under the title "Roosevelt in Africa."

The War Department now possesses several thousand reels of pictures taken during the great war. In addition to historic news reels and films supposedly illustrative of contemporary manners, Mr. Hays has suggested the preservation of films with a re-created historical background such as "America," "The Covered Wagon," film characterizations of Lincoln and other historical characters.

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