



FORT LEE FILM COMMISSION



JOYCE DOPKEEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Theda Bara, left, filmed in "Carmen" in about 1915 in Fort Lee, N.J., vamping on a rock still visible at an apartment complex on Main Street.

Getting a Close-Up of the Silent-Film Era

By EVE M. KAHN

FROM the days of Thomas Edison, the New York area has been a big part of the film industry, and now modern technology is turning some of the strip malls and storage sheds of New Jersey and New York into silent-movie shrines. With help from the Web, fans of those films can hike along parking lots, weedy streambeds and gritty alleys where early screen

ANOTHER MOVIE ROAD TRIP

A New England town filmmakers love: Shelburne Falls, Mass., along the Mohawk Trail. Page 26.

actors posed as American Indians, Confederate soldiers, Soviet spies, Dickens characters and escaped convicts.

This summer, expert local historians and pres-

ervationists drove me around to look at a few that appear in recently rediscovered film clips. Now I can actually picture Theda Bara beguiling suitors on rock outcroppings in Fort Lee, N.J., or Lionel Barrymore's being followed by star-struck extras on the Cornell campus in Ithaca, N.Y., or D. W. Griffith using hand-forged iron gadgets to produce fade-outs while filming along an eroded canal tow-

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Back in Time: Near New York, Getting

From Weekend Page 21

path in Cuddebackville, N.Y., in Orange County.

"It's like hallowed ground," Ben Model, a silent-film historian and piano accompanist for films, told me, referring to the Cuddebackville blacksmith workshops where Griffith commissioned his newfangled closeable tubes.

Forgotten movie artifacts keep turning up in these towns, museum displays are expanding, and silent films made locally are playing at festivals while

townspeople try to pinpoint which real sites are flickering in the backgrounds.

"The audience just loves sitting there, trying to identify these places," Barbara Davis, the city historian for New Rochelle, N.Y., another of the silent-movie towns, told me as we finished leafing through a newly acquired boxful of movie stills and headed off to the photogenic coastline.

We were following the trail of the film tycoon Edwin Thanhouser, known as the Wizard of New Rochelle. His studio, founded in 1909, produced over 1,000

films with irresistible titles like "Shep's Race With Death" and "In the Hands of the Enemy." By 1917, World War I's economic doldrums and the acting crowd's exodus to Hollywood put the company out of business. (Ned Thanhouser, a descendant, has documented its rise and fall at thanhouser.org.)

"Imagine me 1-95 here," Ms. Davis said, pulling up to a one-story bread factory hemmed in by highway ramps at 30 Grove Avenue, where the Thanhouser studio once sprawled. Fire destroyed that plant in 1913; the staff resourcefully

filmed the pyrotechnics and released a movie called "When the Studio Burned." The company's stuccoed second building, at 320 Main Street, is now a car repair shop in the shadow of a brick apartment tower and gabled houses where Thanhouser stars lived.

The former studio property backs onto a sleepy Long Island Sound inlet. "You see how ideal it was for them to do their waterfront scenes," Ms. Davis said.

Then she drove me to a rowing club headquarters in Hudson Park, where the silent-movie dance stars Vernon and Irene Castle first met, and to a stuccoed yacht club on Harbor Lane West that was home to Lillian Gish.

The aura of silent stars, their thick makeup and over-the-top gestures captured in grainy black and white, and their often tragic fates, seem to captivate people who live near filmed sites.

"The ghosts are alive, there's no doubt about that," Tom Meyers, the executive director of the Fort Lee Film Commission, told me during a two-hour sweep around that town. (A map of his favorite haunts is downloadable at fortlee.com.)

Exhibitions at the Fort Lee Museum and plaques around town commemorate the origins of media giants like Fox and Universal in long-vanished greenhouses, and the youthful stunts of artists like Edward Hopper and Al Hirschfeld in the studios' set and publicity departments.

We drove past rocks visible in Theda Bara stills, partly submerged in an apartment house lawn at 429 Main Street. We peered into a shuttered printing plant on a dead end of Fifth Street, just over the Englewood Cliffs border, where an ancestor of Universal was founded. A nitrate-film storage warehouse on Jane Street, Mr. Meyers explained, is built to withstand the kind of fire that destroyed the Thanhouser plant.

"We haven't had one of those gigantic explosions since about 1925," he said, reassuringly.



A plaque near a supermarket at 2160 Lemoine Avenue notes that around 1912, the filmmaker Alice Guy Blaché set up a studio there called Solax. It went bankrupt a decade later, soon after her husband ran off to Hollywood with a starlet.

"You do get a sense of Alice when you're shopping for your groceries," Mr. Meyers said, only a little dryly. This fall, she will be inducted into the New Jersey Hall of Fame; a grass-roots campaign called her a "Reel Jersey Girl."

This summer, Fort Lee film lovers' protests staved off demolition of a white gabled house at 2423 First Street that once housed Rambo's Tavern. Griffith and the comedy producer Mack Sennett were among those who gathered often in its backyard orchard, now a plane of pavement and grass.

"This was a real incubator for the film industry," Mr. Meyers said.

The Barrymore family lived near Rambo's, on Hammett Avenue. In 2001, their house was razed, despite outcry, to make way for brick townhouses.

Outdoor movies (silents and talkies) are shown at the Fort Lee Community Center. Galleries for film artifacts are under construction near the George Washington Bridge.

"We're getting a sense of our own history that's very marketable," Mr. Mey-



THE HISTORY CENTER IN TOMPKINS COUNTY/IMPP

Irene Castle in the silent film "Patria" (1916), filmed in Ithaca, N.Y., where a silent-movie museum is planned.

a Close-Up of the Silent-Film Era



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Tom Meyers, executive director of the Fort Lee (N.J.) Film Commission, right, at Rambo's Saloon, which was a setting in many silent westerns, left.



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ers said. In Ithaca, enthusiasts plan to install a movie museum in an unprepossessing storage building in Stewart Park, on Cayuga Lake. It is the sole architectural trace of a 1910s studio compound founded by the filmmaker brothers Leopold and Theodore Wharton. With Cornell students as extras, they made hundreds of now underappreciated movies like "The Hermit of Lonely Gulch" and "The Pawn of Fortune."

"Why are you looking at that building?" is the refrain that Diana Riesman, a founder of the Ithaca Motion Picture Project, often hears. "When you tell them why, people are so engaged," she told me. Tracks for set walls, with the cryptic markings "DUNE-GRIP" run along the ceiling of the future Wharton Studio Museum.

Ms. Riesman and her co-founder of the museum project, Constance Bruce, showed me stills and clips (material unearthed partly through the local histori-



DOMINICK BRUZZESE COLLECTION, NEW ROCHELLE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Edwin Thanhouser, center, in a studio in New Rochelle, N.Y., about 1915.

an Terry Harbin, who posts findings at ithacamadmovies.com) and showed me movie sites on steep slopes.

At Ithaca Falls, I could conjure up Wharton villains skulking along the banks. A Cornell frat house, at 106 Cayuga Heights Road, was briefly the home of Irene Castle. After her husband died in a World War I fighter plane crash, she married Robert E. Treman, an Ithaca businessman. Townspeople would gawk at her fur stoles and pet monkey. Her second husband squandered much of her fortune in the stock market, so the match was short-lived.

Leopold Wharton's own half-timbered house, at 116 Kelvin Place, has scarcely changed since the actress Olive Thomas was photographed on its porch during the filming of a detective flick. Ms. Thomas died in 1920, at 25, after poisoning herself with syphilis medication prescribed for her husband, the actor Jack Pickford, who was Mary Pickford's brother.

The Ithaca ghosts are kept alive with screenings and exhibitions. On Aug. 24, the Motion Picture Project is showing a 1916 Wharton comedy, with Oliver Hardy in drag. More screenings will be held in October, Ithaca's official Silent Movie Month.

In the hamlet of Cuddebackville, about 10 miles from Port Jervis, N.Y., and the Pennsylvania border, the half-serious lament I heard from Gretchen Weerheim, the executive director of the Neversink Valley Museum of History and Innovation, was, "Why isn't this Hollywood?" Griffith described the bend in the Neversink River there as "altogether the loveliest spot in America," with skies at twilight that were "transcendently illuminative."

The museum occupies an 18th-century farmstead, with a blacksmith's shop that may have been the one that made the experimental fade-out equipment.

The galleries display a letter from Mary Pickford and a hotel register signed by Cecil B. DeMille and his wife, Constance. Across the street, stone aqueduct abutments provided ominous backdrops for Griffith scenes of Jack Pickford playing a boy rescued from drowning.

Ms. Weerheim and a museum trustee, Seth Goldman, also showed me "Comata, the Sioux," a 1909 drama about an American Indian who protects a young mother from her unfaithful cowboy lover. The climactic confrontations take place on scrubby Neversink Valley hillsides and a porch with scrollwork brackets.

"I'm desperate to find that house," Mr. Goldman said. "Every time we show this, we say: 'Does anybody know? Has anybody seen?'"

On Sept. 19, Mr. Model, the pianist, will play during a screening of five recently digitized movies made in Cuddebackville, mostly Mary Pickford comedies. The museum staff is hoping for outbursts from audience members, recognizing a particular cliff or porch post or gable on screen, intact just down the road.