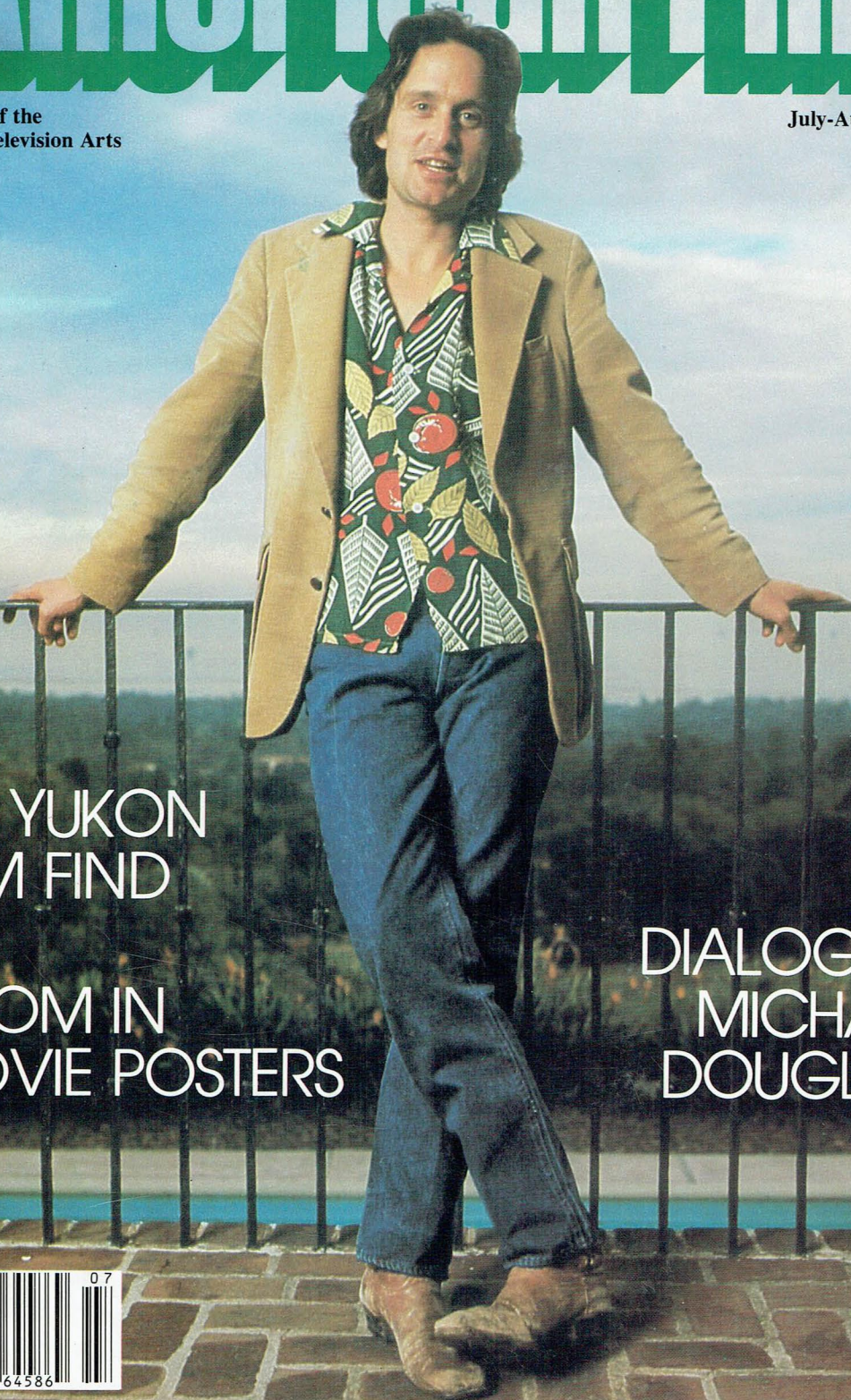


AMERICAN

Magazine of the
Film and Television Arts

July-August 1979
\$1.75

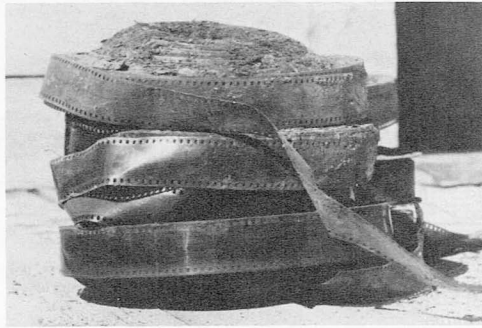


THE YUKON
FILM FIND

BOOM IN
MOVIE POSTERS

DIALOGUE:
MICHAEL
DOUGLAS





There's Film in Them Thar Hills!

Dawson City in the
Yukon Territory is the
site of a new and
strange find: 510 reels
of "lost" film.



SAM KULA

Dawson City, set in the frozen reaches of Canada's Yukon Territory, has a population of eight hundred and, these days, the air of a place frozen in time. Almost the entire town is being restored to what it was like at the turn of the century, when the last great gold rush of modern times turned Dawson City into a boom town. Thirty thousand people poured into the territory, and Dawson City grew with the gold fever. It boasted banks, hotels, newspapers, gambling halls, churches, a library, an opera house, and a host of amusements, including the regular showing of movies.

The gold rush days are long gone, but last summer, amid the restoration work, something like gold fever once again hit Dawson City. Workmen were breaking ground for a recreation center in a vacant lot behind Diamond Tooth Gertie's, a restored gambling hall. Under several feet of sand and gravel, they came upon reel after reel of nitrate film, partially frozen. They were mystified. Word went out to Michael Gates, the curator of collections for Klondike National Historic Sites, the agency that is restoring Dawson City. Work was halted, and the dig was examined. It was indeed a gold strike, but of a different order: The workmen had unearthed a cache of more than five hundred "lost" reels of film dating back to the earliest days of the silent period.

The films, all on 35mm nitrate stock, are from 1903 (the earliest example yet identified) to 1929. They include one-reelers, serials, and news films. Preliminary lists indicate there are representative theatrical films from such obscure companies as Signal, Red Feather, World, Thanouser, Realart, Consolidated, Selig Polyscope, Balboa, Astro, Real, and Bluebird, as well as from such major companies as Edison, Biograph, Vitagraph, Lubin, Selig, Essanay, Pathé, Eclair, Universal, and Columbia. There are also more than fifty news films in the collection—Canadian, American, and British—produced during World War I. These news films include issues of Universal Screen Magazine, Gaumont's "The Reel of Real News," British Canadian Pathé News, Universal Animated Weekly, Pathé Animated

Gazette, Universal Current Events, and Pathé News.

Since the majority of these theatrical films and news films were considered to be lost, the Dawson City cache may turn out to be a very significant archival find in the history of cinema.

So, how did such a priceless mother lode of motion pictures wind up in a frozen pit in the Yukon? A little backtracking is in order.

On August 17, 1896, a trio of prospectors named George Washington Carmack, Skookum Jim, and Tagish Charley dipped their pans into the icy waters of Rabbit Creek and struck it rich. This tiny tributary of the Klondike River, about a mile from where that stream joins the Yukon River in its tortuous route to the Pacific, was immediately renamed Bonanza Creek.

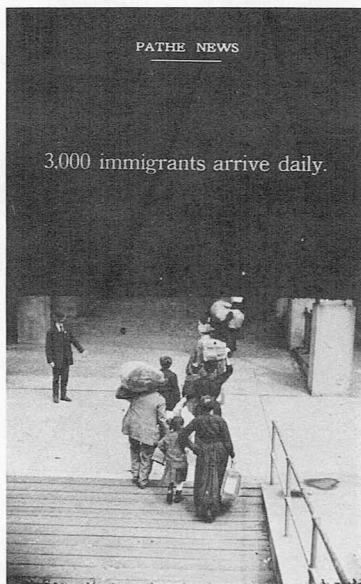
Within weeks, word of the strike had spread around the world—a world in which the vast army of the unemployed faced a severe economic depression. For many, the news that there was gold in the Yukon was an

irresistible lure and challenge; for many more, it was their last hope. The ragged horde of adventurers and ne'er-do-wells who arrived in the Klondike in the summer and fall of 1897 had to contend not only with the mountains but also with a decree by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police that no one could set foot in the Yukon Territory unless he was equipped with at least a ton of goods and essential supplies. Every pound of it had to be backpacked to the summit (thirty-five hundred feet), and the last four miles were a thirty-five-degree slope of ice and drifting snow. For many adventurers, getting to Dawson City became an end in itself, and only a fraction of those who went on ever staked a claim. For the rest, the memory of having survived the horrendous climb over the Chilkoot Pass, and the equally hazardous trip downriver from Lake Bennett to Dawson City, was to be their only reward.

When the weird flotilla of homemade rafts, canoes, and other boats finally arrived that summer, Dawson City became the most populated city in Canada west of Winnipeg. The instant community spawned by gold fever was recorded for posterity by Robert Bonine of the Edison Company, who was probably in the Klondike as early as the summer of 1898. His films, and the photographs of E. A. Hegg, a professional photographer who carried his camera and supplies over the pass during the memorable winter of 1897, convey, as no descriptions can, the vitality of a boom town.

The faces in these films are extraordinary, strained and lost, yet somehow conscious of being part of a great adventure. The poses and the dress suggest just the mix of bravado and naiveté, rustic simplicity and urbane sophistication that one might expect in a town where millionaires took their pleasures alongside impoverished greenhorns.

New fortunes were made every day in this gold dust heaven. And it was possible to buy almost anything in Dawson City; all the amenities of Western civilization (even beyond fresh eggs and vegetables, gambling and prostitutes) were being introduced to meet the demand. Among the amusements, of course, was the motion picture, although little is ac-



Opposite, Front Street, Dawson City, at the height of the gold rush. Top, a sample of the film unearthed last summer in Dawson City. Above, among the films was this Pathé newsreel.

tually known about film exhibition in the town. There were advertisements for the amazing wonders of the Animatograph and the Projectoscope as early as the summer of 1898, but there is no real evidence that these were more than limited presentations by enterprising, itinerant showmen.

By 1903, however, the Dawson Amateur Athletic Association (DAAA) was adding film shows to the programs of its amateur and professional theatricals. The professional performers would have to be transported south again, weather permitting, but neither the exchanges nor the distributors were willing to absorb the cost of shipping the films back. For the newsreels, the serials, the shorts, and the features, Dawson City became the end of the line.

Although it was highly unlikely that anyone would try to pirate these films, it was the practice of distributors to leave the prints in the custody of the Canadian Bank of Commerce, one of the two rival banks in Dawson City. The bank, ignoring or ignorant of the fire hazard associated with nitrocellulose-base film (the standard industry stock until 1950), stored the growing collection in the basement of the Carnegie Library. Since Dawson City lies close enough to the Arctic Circle so that the ground is permanently frozen at a depth between ten and fifteen feet, one can assume that the library basement approximated the refrigerated storage conditions recommended for nitrate film.

The rest of the story comes from Clifford Thomson, who worked at the bank between 1928 and 1932 and also served as treasurer of the Hockey Association, which operated a rink next to the DAAA building. Thomson, now retired, recalls that there was also an open-air swimming pool on the site which was covered with boards when the rink was flooded each winter. Under the weight of the ice, the boards used to sag, and in the summer of 1929, the decision was made to eliminate the pool (and thus the problem). At Thomson's suggestion, all the film that had accumulated in the library's basement was used as fill. Well covered with earth, and with the boards replaced, this slice of North American history continued to make its own humble contribution in support of the DAAA's recreational program.

There the films lay, forgotten, until last year, when the workmen were breaking ground for the recreation center at the site where the DAAA clubhouse and arena had once stood. The wheel in Dawson City, as elsewhere, frequently turns full circle.

At first the news from Dawson City seemed improbable—reels of silent film turning up in the cold and dreary Yukon. As director of Canada's National Film Archives, I called curator Michael Gates to confirm the treasure trove. Then I went to the location myself to ascertain the value and extent of the find. With the aid of a borrowed shovel, I proved to my satisfaction that there was indeed a lot of film in the hole and that all of it was nitrate.

We quickly developed a set of pro-

cedures for the safe handling of the film as it was recovered. Gates came up with the ideal temporary vault for the film: an icehouse under renovation (carved out of the hillside and covered with sod) at Bear Creek Mining Camp. There the film was cleaned of rubble, tentatively identified for the inventory, and packed for shipment. Meanwhile, with the help of Kathy Jones, the director of the Dawson City Museum and the logical person to manage the excavation, I set what must be a Canadian bureaucratic record for writing a contract to support the project.

My first estimates, based on the film that lay close to the surface, were that we would only be able to salvage a few of the reels and, at that, only a small portion of each reel. The base was in surprisingly good shape after



nearly fifty years, but seepage from the spring thaws had bleached most of the image. The emulsion had been attacked by chemicals in the soil and by chemicals released in the decomposition of both the metal reels on which the film was mounted and the metal transfer cases in which the reels were packed (six to eight reels to a box). I had to leave Dawson City, but Jones successfully bargained for time with the city manager, delaying the bulldozers. Then the team she had recruited began its delicate work.

The first reports by telephone, a week later, led to a very hasty revision of the estimates. There were a great many more films to be recovered in the roughly twenty-by-thirty-foot hole than we had originally calculated. The films close to the surface were heavily damaged by water, but the films below them were emerging in much better condition, although affected by the damp and corrosion. Many of them had leaders and titles in good enough shape to allow positive identification, and some were even equipped with censor bands and shipping instructions.

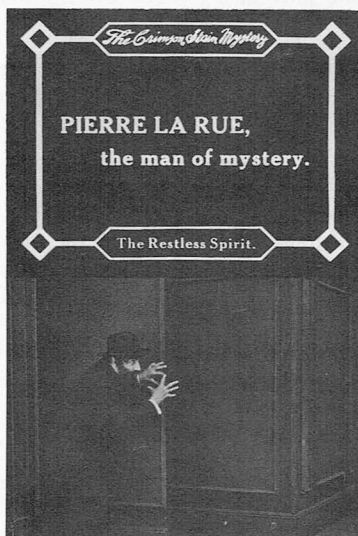
There were formidable problems to solve, however, before any cataloging or restoration work could take place. The key one was moving the film from Dawson City to the National Film Archives laboratory in Ottawa. Nitrate film is classed as a hazardous substance and cannot be openly shipped on a common carrier. We had almost one ton of film after it had been packed and no means of transporting it twenty-eight hundred miles. The answer, after interminable frustration and delay, turned out to be a two-stage operation.

With the aid of a sympathetic trucker, the film was moved 350 miles south to Whitehorse. From there, after all other attempts to have the film shipped had failed, we appealed to the Department of National Defence. In due course, after we had repacked the film in wooden crates lined with tin to comply with regulations, an Air Force Hercules transport picked up the Dawson films.

The first task when the films reached Ottawa was to separate the material into categories based on physical condition. My colleagues and I discovered that all



More treasures from the Dawson City find: opposite, Lillian Russell and Franklyn Roberts in Wild Fire; above, Mae Marsh in Polly of the Circus; below, two frames from a silent melodrama.



of the film was excessively moist. We also discovered that the emulsion was encrusted with particles of debris and in many cases was coated with chemicals which were attacking the image. It was therefore necessary to wash all the films that offered any prospect of being successfully transferred to safety stock in order to stabilize the image. The film was then dried, in order to eliminate the excessive moisture and also allow us to determine the best means of making a transfer.

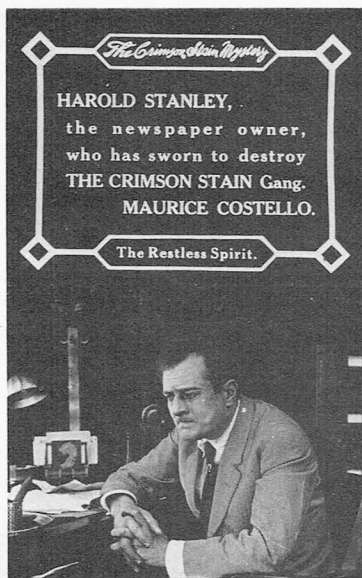
Film that demonstrated only minimal shrinkage could be contact-printed at a reasonable speed. But the bulk of the Dawson films had shrunk beyond the limits of standard laboratory equipment. These films would have to be optically printed, one frame at a time (a much slower and much more expensive process) or redimensioned through a vacuum tank and chemical treatment (so that they would conform to the standard) or, frequently, both.

It was obvious that even four hundred reels would tie up our lim-

ited restoration facilities for a year or more. (An output of less than one reel per working day is not uncommon with film in an advanced stage of decomposition.) We looked for help, and in the tradition of the International Federation of Film Archives, both the AFI archives program and the Library of Congress offered their assistance. AFI archivist Larry Karr started the laborious process of checking to see if prints in the Dawson collection were held elsewhere—obviously, if they were, those titles would drop way down on the list of priorities. Paul Spehr of the Library of Congress offered to transfer some 190 reels of U.S. production titles that would be valuable additions to its collection.

As the excavation continued at Dawson City, the count and the rough lists that Kathy Jones and her team were compiling kept our staff flipping through the AFI *Catalog*, the Library of Congress's *Catalog of Copyright Entries*, and materials in our own library for verification and additional information. Is that "Seven Pearls" (1917–18) a Pearl White serial? No, it isn't (it stars Mollie King), but "Pearl of the Army" (1916–17) is. Is that *Wild Fire* (1915) the only movie in which Lillian Russell appeared? It is, and Lionel Barrymore is her leading man. What in heaven's name is "Rastus and the Gamecock"? It turned out to be a Mack Sennett short (1913), with Chester Conklin. Is that *Polly of the Circus* the U.S. sound or silent version, or is it the German silent version (1914)? Since the print went into the hole in the summer of 1929, it was not likely to be the sound version. Happily, it turned out to be the 1917 U.S. silent version (starring Mae Marsh), which was the initial release of Goldwyn Pictures Corporation, young Sam Goldfish's first production after splitting with Jesse Lasky. The game went on for weeks. It goes on today.

It may well be another year before we can properly assess the value of the Dawson collection. There are a few instantly recognizable names in the credits, although there are others that arguably would have been recognizable if the resources had been available when the histories were written.



Among the silent stars whose films were found was Maurice Costello, here in "The Crimson Stain Mystery."

Apart from the news films, the Dawson collection is strong on serials. Among the titles that have been verified are "The Girl and the Game" (1915–16), with Helen Holmes; "The Crimson Stain Mystery" (1916), with Maurice Costello; "The Neglected Wife" (1916–17), with Ruth Roland; "The Purple Mask" (1917), written and directed by Grace Cunard and Francis Ford; "The Red Ace" (1917), with Marie Walcamp; and "The Lightning Raider" (1918–19). Among the features identified (aside from those already mentioned) are *Princess Virtue* (1917), starring Mae Murray, and *The Lure of Woman* (1915), with Alice Brady. The short films include "The Dancer's Ruse" (1915), a Biograph production, and the only known surviving copy of "Bliss" (1917), a Harold Lloyd film with Bebe Daniels that exists in no archive. Directors whose work is represented include Allan Dwan, Maurice Tourneur, Jack Conway, Tod Browning, Lois Weber, Robert Z. Leonard, Georges Méliès, Christy Cabanne, and James Cruze.

At this writing, the final tally of the Dawson City discovery is officially 510 reels, although a realistic ap-

praisal would place the number of salvageable reels (in whole or in part) at about 425 reels. The numbers are uncertain at even this late date because we are still refining new techniques that may allow the restoration of reels which are now jellied in a solid mass, which are suffering from lateral as well as linear shrinkage, or which are so brittle that the film snaps off, one frame at a time, when an attempt is made to unwind it.

With some of the serials, for example, we are not certain at this stage exactly how many of the chapters are in the collection. As the unidentified reels are reconditioned and transferred, each serial is becoming more and more of a cliff-hanger, until we can finally determine whether or not the last chapter, in which the villain is unmasked and all is explained, is a victim or a survivor.

One thing is certain: To dip into the Dawson collection inventory is to invite endless speculation on the possible significance of little-known productions by established figures ("Ambrose's Lofty Perch," produced by Mack Sennett, for example, or "The Inspector's Double," directed by William Beaudine), as well as a more accurate appraisal of the contribution of more obscure companies.

No one familiar with the considerable resources of film archives throughout the world would seriously argue that the Dawson collection will lead to a complete rewrite of early film history. But we have learned over the years that, since more than half the films produced prior to 1930 are not known to exist, every film from the silent era is a valuable piece of the mosaic. So when it is at least partially complete, the Dawson collection will constitute a vital segment of our cultural heritage.

In this regard, the Dawson discovery is a somewhat bizarre but nonetheless effective reminder that all of the surviving early silent film has by no means been recovered. If the permafrost of the Klondike can yield an important collection after half a century, what treasures may still be locked away in attics and basements all over the world, and in the forgotten corners of the film industry's vaults? ❖

Sam Kula is director of the National Film Archives of Canada.