

University of North Carolina at Asheville

*Silent Mountains: The Silent Film  
Industry in Asheville from 1914 to 1921*

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## Abstract

Following the turn of the century, there was an enormous boom in the motion picture industry within the United States. During the same time period, Asheville was experiencing a flux in population and infrastructure. Visionary investors made Asheville an extremely desirable place to live and visit for the middle and upper classes. This popularity attracted Thomas Edison, whose company was on the forefront of the film industry. The Edison Company made several silent films in Asheville and alerted other film producers to the prospect of film making in Western North Carolina. From the years 1914 to 1921, there were over twenty silent films made in Asheville. For these seven years, Asheville was able to support a thriving motion picture industry based on its merits as a film setting. The industry survived in Asheville until changes in the city and the motion picture industry as a whole devastated film production in Asheville.

At the turn of the twentieth century the United States was on the brink of a cultural revolution. Advancements in science had provided the world with a new form of cultural expression, which would define media and entertainment in the world for the next one hundred years. With Thomas Edison's invention of a moving picture designed for the public in 1892,<sup>1</sup> he created a new era of popular entertainment that would be embraced by cities and towns throughout the United States. Evidence of the popularity of film can be fully recognized by examining the film industry in Asheville, North Carolina from the years 1914 to 1921. During this period, Asheville and its surrounding areas boasted a thriving film industry which provided the setting for over twenty feature films. Within this seven year span, Asheville proved to be an ideal atmosphere for the creation of silent film, before changes in the city and a move to films that featured sound spelled the demise of the Asheville film industry.

There have been no direct studies of the silent film industry in Asheville, North Carolina. Historians have done comprehensive studies of the beginnings of the silent film industry in the United States and there are a few very thorough studies in the history of Asheville from 1914 to 1921, but no historians have addressed the film industry in Asheville directly. This paper uses several excellent histories of Thomas Edison in order to establish his contributions to motion pictures.<sup>2</sup> Also, *A History of Early Film*, by Stephen Herbert provided a complete history of the invention and immediate progression of motion pictures. David Bailey's *Fashionable Asheville* substantiated Edison's

<sup>1</sup> Andre Millard, *Edison and the Business of Innovation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 145.

<sup>2</sup> These include *Edison and the Business of Innovation*, *Thomas Edison and Modern America: A Brief History with Documents*, and *Edison: Inventing the Century*

connection to Asheville as well as gave an account of culture within Asheville during the early part of the Twentieth Century. The combination of Bailey's account and *The Asheville Citizen* gave an excellent synopsis of Asheville's popular culture in the 1910's and 1920's. *A History of Buncombe County* by Dr. F.A. Sondley provided an extremely thorough record of the physical development of Asheville around the turn of the century. Perhaps the most useful secondary source for my research was Jenny Henderson's *The North Carolina Filmography*. This source provided basic information about silent films made in Asheville and allowed me to research the titles further using the American Film Institute's Catalog of Silent Films. However, Henderson's work did not focus specifically on Asheville. Despite having no secondary source devoted to Asheville's silent film industry, there was an excellent base for my arguments about the thriving silent film industry in Asheville from 1914 to 1921.

The invention of a motion picture camera was an enormous stride for photography. In Edison's words the motion picture could be "an instrument which does for the Eye what the phonograph does for the ear, which is recording and reproduction of things in motion, and in such a form as to be both cheap, practical, and convenient."<sup>3</sup> For the first time it was possible to record action on film rather than relying on still photographs to tell a story. The invention had grand implications for both news and entertainment. Edison's original Kinetoscope presented a sequence of still photographs in rapid revolution, which could be viewed through a small window. The machine gave the impression of continuous movement within the frame.<sup>4</sup> The storytelling power of this

<sup>3</sup> Neil Baldwin, *Edison: Inventing the Century* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 211-212.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Herbert, *A History of Early film, Volume 1* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 1.

medium was instantly realized by Edison and his company rapidly improved their original invention. By 1896, the problem of projection had been rudimentarily solved and the motion picture industry was born.

Original motion pictures were primarily for documentary purposes. "One of the most obvious ways in which phonograph records and motion pictures shaped modern experience was their wide circulation of 'hits' and news. Recording and photography attested to the 'real' events of the day, supplementing newspapers, which continued to provide literate Americans with a daily ritual of consuming and belonging in the modern world."<sup>5</sup> For the first decade of its existence motion pictures avoided complex and lengthy plots in favor of short segments of real-life film. A lengthy production would have been unsuitable for the technology of the time. Edison's original Kinetoscopes were in essence large boxes where the viewer would stand over the machine and peer through a viewfinder to see the images. This would have been entirely unsuitable for feature length motion pictures because it was uncomfortable and exclusive. However, soon after motion pictures were able to be projected, the monetary value of film as entertainment was realized.

The film industry was growing exponentially because of the new view of the world it provided. The city of Asheville was also growing extremely quickly around the turn of the twentieth century. The charter of the Western North Carolina Railroad, which ran to Asheville, opened the city up for advancement in 1855.<sup>6</sup> After the railroad

<sup>5</sup> Theresa M. Collins and Lisa Gitelman, *Thomas Edison and Modern America: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2002), 161.

<sup>6</sup> David Bailey *Fashionable Asheville*, Vol. 1 (Book Surge LLC, 2004), 37.

extended its tracks over the mountain, Asheville's population boomed. In the year 1830, the population of Asheville stood at 350 people; by 1910 it was up to 18,672. That number continued to increase and was up to 28,504 in 1920 and 50,167 in 1930.<sup>7</sup> The increase in population that followed the introduction of the railroad was staggering.

With drastic increases in population, Asheville had a dire need for new infrastructure. The sudden onslaught of construction allowed visionaries to build Asheville in a manner that no other city could duplicate. Creative investors such as Edward Dilworth Latta, of Charlotte, were able to buy land and build a new city as they saw fit. Latta "envisioned the new community as 'a city of avenues', the first southern suburban paradise for the middle class, a venture that would overcome postwar pessimism and negative outlook and thereby inaugurate a 'march of improvement.'"<sup>8</sup> This idea of creating a fashionable "city of Avenues" was embraced by wealthy residents and visitors to Asheville. The installation of mass transit was one of the many significant improvements made in Asheville during this period. One form of transportation was exceptionally desirable to investors in Asheville, the electric railroad. The technology was extremely new when it caught the attention of powerful investors in Asheville and was also an invention of Thomas Edison's company. "An Edison-Field locomotive, weighing three tons, twelve feet long and five feet wide, and with a speed of nine miles an hour, was completed in time for the railway exposition that opened in Chicago in 1883.. this modest though interesting demonstration aroused enormous excitement over

<sup>7</sup>F.A. Sondley, *A History of Buncombe County N.C.* (Asheville N.C.: The Advocate Printing Company, 1930)235.

<sup>8</sup> Bailey, *Fashionable Asheville*, vol. 2, 161

electric railways."<sup>9</sup> The excitement was especially felt by Edward Latta, and he quickly planned for such a railway to be installed in Asheville. "On February 24, 1890, the Charlotte News reported that Thomas Edison was being entertained by Latta and agreed to install a trolley circuit [in Asheville]."<sup>1</sup>

In coming to Asheville, Edison brought along his interest in the production of film to the picturesque city in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The Southern mountain setting was a perfect location for the production of silent film. "The antebellum setting was particularly well suited to the new entertainment medium [film]. Productions had to be brief, which meant the subject matter had to be instantly recognizable and present obvious character types. At the same time, in order to succeed financially the popular pictures had to be escapist entertainment rather than serious fare. Urban and industrial settings were usually avoided in favor of more appealing scenes."<sup>1</sup> This made Asheville and its surrounding natural beauty the perfect setting for silent films. The city itself was mildly escapist because it was unlike any other American city at the time. It presented a different character and personality than the enormous metropolitan centers of the North. Also, Asheville was entirely surrounded by naturally scenic locations which were fairly easily accessible from the city. This offered a diverse range of filming locales within a small area. Edison recognized Asheville's potential as a setting for his silent film endeavors and became a frequent visitor to the Asheville area.

<sup>9</sup> Baldwin, 242

<sup>0</sup> Bailey, *Fashionable Asheville*, vol. 2, 157  
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Edward B.C. Campbell Jr., *The Celluloid South:  
Hollywood and the Southern Myth* (Knoxvil  
University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 78.

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Asheville's first experiments with motion pictures were not on a very grand scale. The first documented motion picture filmed in and around Asheville was a short documentary entitled *Motion Pictures of Asheville Taken*.<sup>12</sup> The film was simply a compilation of views in and around Asheville, but it opened the doors for the production of feature films with Asheville as their setting. Viewers of the first motion pictures in Asheville recognized its potential for feature films. Asheville offered a desirable combination that few cities boasted to the motion picture industry. Asheville was a European styled city and was surrounded by beautiful mountains, making it extremely desirable for the escapist nature of silent film.

In the year 1914, the first attempts at popular film were made in Asheville. In this year there were six feature films produced in Asheville. The films were: *Across the Burning Trestle*, *A Warning from the Past*, *Caleb Trench*, *Her Secret*, *Meg of the Mountain*, and *Squire Rodney's Daughter*.<sup>13</sup> All of the films produced in 1914 were produced by the Edison Motion Picture Company. Edison was originally attracted to the city to install the trolley in downtown Asheville. However, after recognizing the beauty of the city, Edison decided to bring his motion picture company to Asheville. Despite the impressive number of feature films made in Asheville in 1914, none of them were successful. The motion picture facet of Edison's business empire faltered soon after the Asheville films were produced. The failure of Edison's Motion Picture Company was due to a lack of commercial success of his films and Edison's personal inability to focus on a single project. However, the productive year set a precedent for silent features

<sup>12</sup> Jenny Henderson, *The North Carolina Filmography: Over 2000 Film and Television works made in the State 1905 through 2000* (Jefferson, N.C. and London: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2002) 35.

<sup>13</sup> Henderson. 28.

being made in Asheville. This trend was not discouraged by the lack of popularity of the first batch of Asheville features, and the next year brought another important set of films. Asheville's popularity with the upper classes made the city well known within the upper echelon of American society. This notoriety made the city memorable in the minds of many of the world's leading film producers. After Edison's initial films in Asheville, a boom in film production began in the following year.

Silent film took a major step forward in 1915; in this year, the first successful films were made in Asheville. *Captain Bob of the National Guard* and *O'Garry of the Royal Mounted* were not well received, but two other films made in 1915 grabbed the first bit of spotlight for Asheville based film.<sup>14</sup> *The End of the Road* was released on November 11, 1915.<sup>15</sup> The film was directed by Thomas Ricketts and starred Harold Lockwood, May Allison, and William Carrol.<sup>16</sup> The film's screenplay was written by William Pigott and tells the story of Paul Harvard (Harold Lockwood). The film is an intricate tale of love, deceit, and moonshine. The film tells the story of a wealthy northerner who falls for a beautiful southern woman. The woman is threatened by and nearly forced to marry a crooked real estate agent. Eventually, the real estate agent is arrested and the wealthy northerner gets his southern belle.<sup>17</sup> *The End of the Road* was produced by the American Film Company by special arrangement with Darcy and Woford.<sup>18</sup> The film was distributed by Mutual Film Corporation which distributed 49

<sup>14</sup> Henderson, 133.

<sup>15</sup> American Film Institute Catalog of Silent Films, [www.afi.com/members/catalog/](http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/) (hereafter citations of this source will use AFI Catalog)

<sup>16</sup> AFI Catalog

<sup>17</sup> AFI Catalog

<sup>18</sup> AFI Catalog

films in 1915.<sup>19</sup> The film showed Asheville's ability to represent the antebellum South as a thriving and stylish metropolitan locale. This was an important contrast to the often dreary industrial cities common in the North. Large cities were the major consumers of silent films and the favorable contrast Asheville provided to these cities made \$lms produced in Asheville desirable in northern cities.

Another popular film made in Asheville in 1915 was *M'liss*.<sup>20</sup> Directed by O.A.C. Lund, *M'liss* was released on March 8, 1915.<sup>21</sup> The film starred Barbara Tennant as M'liss, Howard Estabrook, and O.A.C. Lund. Lund was a versatile and prolific film maker during the silent film era. He produced, directed, wrote, or acted in 38 films from

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1914 to 1923. *M'liss* followed a common style in silent films at the time and featured a protagonist who, after dealing with extreme adversity and a cunning antagonist, found prosperity and love. The film told the story of a wild, uneducated young girl named M'liss who is socialized by the town schoolmaster. Eventually M'liss become; a refined young woman, but was unable to escape her love for the former schoolmaster. After a complicated bout of jealousy, the two lovers are reconciled and live their lives together in prosperity.<sup>2</sup> The film displayed Asheville as the quaint home place of heroes and heroines. The rags-to-riches theme was extremely popular in silent films. This theme necessitated a humble locale to be the initial home of the protagonist. The rural area surrounding Asheville was a perfect setting to fill this role and did so in *M'liss*. The film

<sup>19</sup> API Catalog

<sup>20</sup> Henderson, 113.

<sup>21</sup> API Catalog

<sup>22</sup> API Catalog

<sup>23</sup> API Catalog

was produced and distributed by the World Film Corporation, which produced nearly three hundred films in the 1910's including several in Asheville.<sup>24</sup>

By the year 1916, the Asheville film industry was in full swing. The successes of the year before had carried over and the popularity of films produced in Asheville was undeniable. Despite the failure of *A Romance in Asheville*, Asheville boasted four popular films made in 1916.<sup>25</sup> Among these was *The Summer Girl*, which was released

on August 14, 1916. The film stars Mollie King, Arthur Ashley, and Dave Ferguson; the film is a heartwarming tale of a young wealthy girl who falls in love with a struggling artist only to have their relationship forbidden by her socially conscious mother. Despite this, Mary [Mollie King] goes to the artist's studio and confuses a female model for his new love interest. Both Mary and Bruce [Arthur Ashley] are devastated. Eventually, Mary's father brings Mary's two suitors together and tells them that he has lost all his wealth. The other man is immediately disinterested in Mary, but Bruce is persistent in his love. Because of his devotion Mary's father allows him to marry his daughter and after explaining the mix up with the model they quickly fall back into love. Afterwards, a portrait of Mary painted by Bruce brings him overnight fame as an artist, and the two live happily ever after.<sup>27</sup> The film was produced and distributed by the World Film Corporation which was a consistent presence on the Asheville silent film scene.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> API Catalog

<sup>25</sup> Henderson, 149.

<sup>26</sup> API Catalog

<sup>27</sup> API Catalog

<sup>28</sup> API Catalog

Another popular Asheville produced film from 1916 was *Bawbs O'Blue Ridge*,<sup>29</sup> written by Monte M. Katterjohn and directed by Charles Miller. The film is another story of love and inheritance. In the film, Barbara Colby inherits a significant sum of money and finds love with a wealthy writer from Philadelphia. She offers him her inheritance out of the belief that he is poor but he refuses. After this selfless display, Barbara is convinced of his sincere love for her and happily moves to Philadelphia with him.<sup>30</sup>

*Bawbs O 'Blue Ridge* showed Asheville's knack for displaying the Appalachian region. Appalachia was a popular setting in silent film and Asheville's location in the heart of the mountains was an important factor in the city's popularity in film. *Bawbs O 'Blue Ridge* was produced by <sup>31</sup> the New York Motion Picture Corporation and distributed by Triangle Film Corporation."

The two other successful silent films made in Asheville in 1916 were *The Foolish Virgin* and *Then I'll Come Back to You*.<sup>32</sup> *The Foolish Virgin* was a fairly small-scale film produced by the Clara Kimball Young Film Corporation. The Young Corporation produced only six films from 1916 to 1919.<sup>33</sup> The film was directed by Albert Capellani and starred his brother Paul.<sup>34</sup> *Then I'll Come Back to You* is a tale of a young boy living in the Adirondack Mountains. This is significant because it is the first time when the scenic areas surrounding Asheville had been used to represent some other known location. This was due to cheaper production costs in the post-war south and the climate

<sup>29</sup> Henderson, 18.

<sup>30</sup> API Catalog

<sup>31</sup> API Catalog

<sup>32</sup> API Catalog

<sup>33</sup> API Catalog

<sup>34</sup> API Catalog

<sup>35</sup> Henderson, 168.

being much more hospitable in the winter in Asheville as opposed to Upstate New York. Asheville had found a niche in the motion picture industry and was gaining notoriety as a travel destination for the rich and famous.

The year 1917 was less prolific than the previous year, but both films produced were popular and well received. *A Son of the Hills*<sup>36</sup> was released on June 25, 1917 and was set in the mountains of North Carolina<sup>37</sup>. The screenplay was written by Joseph F. Poland and directed Harry Davenport<sup>38</sup>. The story was based on industry in Western North Carolina. This film once again displayed Asheville as the film representation of North Carolina's mountains. *A Son of the Hills* told the story of a poor young man [Sandy Moreno] from the mountains of North Carolina who leaves his home in search of success and wealth. Sandy met a prosperous business man who funded his education and sent him back to his hometown to establish a factory there. The factory was a success and Sandy found love and happiness in his hometown<sup>39</sup>. *A Son of the Hills* was produced by Vitagraph Company of America, which was one of the most prolific production companies of the silent film era<sup>40</sup>.

The other notable film made in Asheville in 1917 was entitled *The Warfare of the Flesh*<sup>41</sup>. It was a biblical epic about "the fall of man". In this film the mountains surrounding Asheville functioned as the Garden of Eden. One scene filmed in Swannanoa was meant to represent "Hell". The scene lasted seven minutes, required five

<sup>36</sup> Henderson, 156.

<sup>37</sup> API Catalog

<sup>38</sup> API Catalog

<sup>39</sup> API Catalog

<sup>40</sup> Herbert, 154.

<sup>41</sup> API Catalog

hundred actors and cost about one hundred thousand dollars.<sup>42</sup> The film was released in May of 1917 and was the personal project of Edward Warren, who produced, wrote and directed the film<sup>43</sup>. The story of *The Warfare of the Flesh* is complex and spans from the creation of man, to the time of Christ, to the era in which the film was made. The plot wrestled with complex ideas about the human conscience and virtue. The film was the first silent film produced in Asheville that could be considered an epic film because of its style and content. *The Warfare of the Flesh* had a very large budget for an Asheville produced film at the time<sup>44</sup>. This meant that many investors saw the potential of Asheville produced films to garner huge profits. The profits rarely met their expectations, but investors were not completely discouraged with the silent films being produced in and around Asheville.

1918 was even less productive than the year before, but both films released were relatively successful. *The Whirlpool* was released on June 30, 1918<sup>45</sup>; it was produced by Alan Crosland and written by Eve Unsell. Unsell wrote 87 pictures during the teens and twenties in genres ranging from epics to horror films.<sup>46</sup> *The Whirlpool* can best be categorized as a thriller. The plot was complex and intriguing. The story employed familiar themes in silent films such as deceit, justice, and love<sup>47</sup>. The film was both produced and distributed by the Select Pictures Corporation.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Henderson, 179.

<sup>43</sup> API Catalog

<sup>44</sup> Henderson 179

<sup>45</sup> Henderson, 182.

<sup>46</sup> API Catalog

<sup>47</sup> API Catalog

<sup>48</sup> AFI Catalog

The other film success of 1918 for Asheville was released on the final day of the year. *The Challenge Accepted* was written by Donald Gordon Reid and directed by Edwin L. Hollywood,<sup>49</sup> an ominous name for the Asheville film industry. The film was a small scale production by Arden Pictures, which only produced one notable film during the silent film era.<sup>50</sup> The picture was the first and only silent film produced in Asheville that took on the issue of war. The film tells the story of Sally Houston (Zena Keefe) who falls in love with a young man and convinces him to enlist in the army to fight the Germans in World War I. After doing so, her lover becomes very unhappy and |deserts to come home, but is convinced to return by Houston. Later, she is taken captive by a draft dodger and is saved by her boyfriend who is on leave, before he announces that he's leaving for Europe to fight for democracy.<sup>51</sup>

In the next couple years, there was a drought in film production in Asheville. There were no notable films produced in 1919 and the next year was not much more productive. *Blue Ridge Justice* and *The Lure Eternal* were both flops produced in 1920. The only successful film from that year was *The Gauntlet*, released in July 1920<sup>52</sup>. The film was directed by Edwin L. Hollywood, who was the only director to make multiple films in Asheville during the silent film era<sup>5</sup>. The cast included Harry T. Morey, Louiszita Valentine, and Frank Hagney<sup>5</sup>. The film was set in Tennessee, but recorded in the area surrounding Asheville and tells a typical love overcoming adversity story. *The Gauntlet* used several familiar themes in Appalachian lore. The story revolves | around an

<sup>49</sup> API Catalog

<sup>50</sup> API Catalog

<sup>51</sup> API Catalog

<sup>52</sup> API Catalog

<sup>53</sup> API Catalog

<sup>54</sup> API Catalog

inspector named Roderick Beverly. Beverly is dispatched to Tennessee to investigate a moonshining crime syndicate. However, Roderick falls in love with an Appalachian woman and has to topple the criminals in order to attain his lover.<sup>55</sup> The film was produced and distributed by the Vitagraph Company of America, which produced and distributed several of Asheville's silent films.<sup>56</sup> The following year was to bring Asheville's crowning achievement in silent film.

By 1920, film production was not the only manifestation of the motion picture industry common in Asheville. Asheville boasted two silent film theatres by 1915. The Galax and the Princess theatres showed silent features seven days a week. By 1917, the Strand theatre was up and running in Asheville.<sup>57</sup> Film was an important social function in the city and attracted large crowds for shows. The theatres were one of the social centers for Asheville natives and attracted world renowned actors and actresses for appearances. The film industry had multiple facets within the city of Asheville and enjoyed success with both production and movie sales. However, production success began to drop off towards the end of the decade.

Despite the waning success of silent films made in Asheville in 1919 and 1920, the city was preparing for a grand attempt to break out on to the international film market. Asheville's first attempt at a true blockbuster was released on August 21, 1921.<sup>58</sup> *The Conquest of Canaan* was an interpretation of a popular Booth Tarkington novel

<sup>55</sup> API Catalog

<sup>56</sup> Henderson, 71.

<sup>57</sup> The Asheville Citizen, May 6, 1917.

<sup>58</sup> API Catalog

which was adapted to film by Frank Tuttle.<sup>59</sup> The film was groundbreaking for film in Asheville because it incorporated the downtown area as no other film had before. *The Conquest of Canaan* also brought powerful, upper echelon actors and directors to the city which had never before made a film in Asheville. The director was R. William Neill<sup>60</sup> who was a close personal friend of Charlie Chaplin<sup>61</sup>. Neill was a powerful director in the silent film industry and his work on *The Conquest of Canaan* marked the first time Asheville was able to attract a director of his caliber.

The lead role in *The Conquest of Canaan* went to famed silent film star Thomas Meighan.<sup>62</sup> He played Joe Louden, the protagonist of the Tarkington novel as well as the film interpretation. Meighan was one of the most popular actors in film at the time he took the part in *The Conquest of Canaan*. He starred in 81 feature films in his career and was virtually never cast as a secondary character.<sup>63</sup> "To watch Thomas Meighan perform on screen is to experience a pure delight, even from the distance of eight decades. He was a fantastic actor. Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on April 9th, 1879, Thomas ("Tommy") Meighan starred on Broadway before turning to films in 1914. With handsome and rugged Irish features, and a strong air of pure masculinity, Tommy Meighan became one of the top male stars of the silent screen era."<sup>64</sup> An actor with such clout in the film world had never before come to Asheville to star in a film. A renowned actress starred opposite Thomas Meighan in *The Conquest of Canaan*. Doris Kenyon boasted a diverse career in stage, opera, and silent and sound era film. After making her

<sup>59</sup> API Catalog

<sup>60</sup> API Catalog

<sup>61</sup> Helen Wykle, personal interview by author, September 25, 2006.

API Catalog

<sup>63</sup> API Catalog

<sup>64</sup> Golden Silents "Thomas Meighan," [www.goldensilents.com/stars/thomasmeighan.html](http://www.goldensilents.com/stars/thomasmeighan.html).

film debut in the *The Hidden Hand*, Doris went on to star in forty-four feature films. She played Joe Louden's love interest, Ariel Taber in *The Conquest of Canaan*.<sup>65</sup>

The film opens with a car pulling up to a building downtown, giving the audience its first view of Canaan. Asheville was transformed to the imaginary city of Canaan for the film. Many signs were painted over in downtown Asheville to completely transform its identity to Canaan. The next shot cuts to a group of men playing a game of dice outside. The scene provides the first glimpse of Meighan as a well dressed, but down-to-earth character enjoying the game with middle class friends. After Meighan is established as the protagonist, the film cuts back to a downtown office, where an unhappy, elderly rich man is sitting in his office. This character is intentionally cast in a poor light in order to solidify his role as the antagonist. In silent films, appearances and gestures are extremely important; without dialogue actions and appearances are the only means for character development. After establishing the two opposing characters, the film goes back to the dice game and introduces the female lead. She wanders up to the game, but is ignored and leaves frustrated. Soon after the dice game, a driving scene gives the first defining view of Asheville, which features the obelisk in Pack Square.

Once the overall introductions are made for the important characters and setting, the director begins to develop the protagonist. In an exchange with a wealthy adversary the audience learns of Joe Louden's (Meighan) cunning nature. The wealthy man comes to break up the dice game and in the process drops a coin. Louden immediately drops his gum, steps on it, and then steps on the coin adhering it to his shoe. The rich man is totally unaware of the sly maneuver and never realizes he has been robbed. The action

<sup>65</sup> Golden Silents "Doris Kenyon," [www.goldensilents.com/stars/doriskenyon.html](http://www.goldensilents.com/stars/doriskenyon.html).

later moves to the house of the girl who was at the dice game. Ariel (Doris Kenyon) lives in a decent house with two older men. In the scene, the men are arguing and one falls ill from the exertion of the fight. Following the fight, Ariel walks down the stairs obviously dressed up and is met by Joe. They walk to a party at a very fancy house, but only Ariel enters the party. Joe sneaks around outside the house, obviously not invited because his social status is not high enough to enter the party. Eventually his presence is discovered and he is beaten and forced to leave by Ariel's wealthy suitor at the party. After the party, Ariel finds out that one of the older men she was living with passed away while she was at the party and that she and her remaining elderly companion are moving away from Canaan. She confronts Joe before riding off on the moving wagon and both are visibly upset. Joe walks to the town saloon after finding out about his girlfriend and is caught up in a tense situation. After meeting a female friend at the bar, she sees a man she recognizes and follows him to the upstairs of the saloon. However, the man she was sitting with grows jealous and alerts a tough looking man who rushes upstairs to find the girl and the man she was meeting. Luckily, Joe had seen what was developing and gone upstairs to alert the couple just in time for them to escape. Obviously unhappy in Canaan, Joe moves to some far away place and gets a job working in a ship yard and studying diligently on his breaks. He eventually gets a letter from his lover and returns to Canaan. He disembarks from the Asheville trolley, which was installed by Edison's company. The sign on the side of the trolley is changed to "Canaan Rapid Transit Company," but it is unmistakably downtown Asheville to which Meighan returns. Joe gets a job as an attorney due to his studies of law while away from Canaan. While at his

new office, Ariel calls and sets up a meeting "across main street bridge" and their love is rekindled. However, it is apparent that Joe's social status is still not high enough for them to be married. Afterwards, Joe goes and talks to the tough guy at the saloon about the situation in the bar before he left Canaan. The man seems to understand and later finds Joe's female friend and the jealous man arguing in the basement of the saloon. The jealous man's hand is bandaged peculiarly and the tough guy is very suspicious. After a stare down, the tough guy shoots the jealous man and unwraps his bandaged hand to reveal a gun and his intentions to kill the girl. The city goes crazy and the man is brought out into the street surrounded by an angry mob. The mob rushes out into Pack Square, providing several wonderful shots of downtown Asheville. Joe rushes out to the man's aid and insists that he is innocent and deserves a trial. Joe defends the man and he is quickly acquitted. Joe is considered a hero for his successful defense of the innocent man and is finally free to marry Ariel.<sup>66</sup>

The film was a true testament to the versatility of Asheville as a film set. The city was entirely transformed for the film. It included shots of many of Asheville's most recognizable landmarks. These included: Pack Square, Asheville City Hall, Thomas Wolfe's father's shop, Haywood Road, the First Baptist Church, Rhododendron Park, Beaver Lake Swimming Pool, Biltmore and Patton Avenues, and the Swannanoa Berkeley Hotel.<sup>67</sup> Pack Square was entirely shut down during the filming of many of the shots. The film was distributed and marketed by Paramount Studios, which was a true powerhouse in the silent film industry. For the first time, a film made in Asheville

had gained national notoriety. The combination of famous actors and a well known director brought the large-scale attention to Asheville's film industry. However, the film was not well received on the national level. Critics gave the film mediocre reviews; the New York Times reviewed the film and called the film a complete failure:

Booth Tarkington's old novel, "**The Conquest of Canaan**," has been dug up for the screen, but nothing has been done to it to bring it to life. ... but in the present case only animated illustrations of no particular distinction have been substituted for the words, and they make a poor substitute. Thomas Meighan, who takes the leading role, is a nice-looking fellow and he has a certain whimsical manner sometimes that gives his characters a light and agreeable touch, but he scarcely ever creates a living, human being out of an author's fictitious figure, ... The others in the cast — Doris Kenyon as Ariel Taber; Louis Hendricks, as Judge Pike; Paul Everton, as Happy Farley, and so on — are just lay figures without anything to distinguish them from hundreds of others of their kind on the stage and screen. Nor has the director of the production, R. William Neil, given it any cinematographic individuality. There have been much worse pictures than "The Conquest of Canaan," and also much better. It's just mediocre ..... That's why "The Conquest of Canaan" isn't convincing. It's too obviously fiction.<sup>68</sup>

The poor reviews were a big shot to the Asheville film industry and it never truly recovered. *The Conquest of Canaan* was the last film made in Asheville until *The Swan* was partially filmed at the Biltmore Estate in 1952. Poor reviews were not entirely to blame for the failure of the film industry in Asheville.

The film industry was changing extremely quickly in the 1920's. Silent films were often accompanied by musicians to enhance the stories. This system was costly, difficult to maintain, and hated by film producers. "In these silent films that weren't really silent, the means of providing sound was clumsy and approximate, an aspect over which film makers could have little control. Unless a complete score was provided, which was rarely done, the film maker was at the mercy of the theatre musicians."<sup>69</sup>

<sup>68</sup> "The Screen," New York Times. July 11, 1921.  
[http://toto.lib.unca.edu/films/conquest%20of%20canaan/new\\_york\\_times\\_july\\_11.htm](http://toto.lib.unca.edu/films/conquest%20of%20canaan/new_york_times_july_11.htm) (accessed September 21, 2006).

<sup>69</sup> Jack C. Ellis, *A History of Film* (Engelwood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), 127

Musical scores had to be written for films and reliable musicians had to be recruited and paid. Often theatre's success depended heavily on the musicians which accompanied their pictures. This was extremely stressful for theatre owners and most of them rightfully desired a change. This change came in the form of films that had sound as a part of the overall production. By the end of the decade, film had completely made the switch to films with sound. The change was logical for theatre owners, film producers, and filmgoers. Having a score written specifically for a film allowed producers to create a multi-sensory experience for viewers. Dialogue in films allowed for a wider diversity of plots and more in depth characterization. Sound in film truly enhanced the artistic potential of the motion picture industry, but spelled the end for large scale onsite filming.

It was impractical to try to record film and sound in a crowded city because there would inevitably be too much background noise. Also, frequently moving cameras caused significant problems in film production. The practice created 'camera movement' that was visible in films. This made sound stages especially practical and cost effective because sets could be manipulated around cameras instead of moving the camera around a static city.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, the use of soundstages grew in popularity. Hollywood became the center of film production in the United States. The climate in Southern California was virtually always suitable for filming and the major production companies recognized the move to soundstage film production. Films could splice together brief images of natural beauty with interior scenes filmed in sound stages and produce films with much lower budgets. The transition to sound film was immediate and devastating for the

<sup>70</sup> David Bordwell, *Camera Movement: The Coming of Sound and the Classical Hollywood Style, The Hollywood Film Industry*, ed. Paul Kerr (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 149.

Asheville film industry. Films with sound were more popular with audiences and easier to produce than onsite silent films.

Also, Asheville fell on hard times in the 1920's. Tourism had begun to wane in the twenties and many factors led to a loss of popularity for Asheville. Asheville's economy was largely based on money spent by wealthy travelers. The opulent hotels of Asheville were successful when the railroad was the predominant form of distance travel. The hotels of Asheville catered to crowds that rode in on the train and planned to stay in one location for a significant span of time. However, with advancements in automobiles, this form of travel became almost completely obsolete. The middle class favored convenient car travel during times of leisure, rather than long stays in resort cities such as Asheville.<sup>71</sup>

Also, the United States economy began to show signs of faltering in the 1920's. The loss of excess cash flow within the upper-class was extremely detrimental to the tourism industry in Asheville. This had a direct effect on Asheville's film industry because it hurt Asheville's ability to present itself as European styled city. Film's success was dependant on its ability to be an alternative to reality.<sup>72</sup> With a depressed economy, Asheville was unable to present the escapist atmosphere which had made silent films popular from 1917 to 1921. With the crash of the stock market in 1929, Asheville was completely crippled. Tourism within the United States was virtually destroyed after the fall of the U.S. economy. There was no need for a playground of the rich and famous

<sup>1</sup> Sue Greenberg and Jan Kahn, *Asheville: A Postcard History*, vol. 2 (Dover, New Hampshire: Arcadia Publishing, 1997), 83. <sup>72</sup> Campbell, 78.

during the Great Depression. Without tourism, Asheville's economy was devastated and would not recover until recently.

Despite its failure to make the jump to film with sound, Asheville was able to support a flourishing silent film industry. The city and surrounding area was the setting for over twenty films from 1914 to 1921. The sheer volume of films made in Asheville demonstrates a significant film presence in the city during the silent film era. Asheville produced important silent films which attracted some of the leading talent in film at the time. Silent film is certainly an integral part of Asheville's history and continues to be a vital part of the city's cultural past.

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