

Communications

RESCUED FROM THE PERMAFROST: The Dawson Collection of Motion Pictures*

The discovery of gold in 1896 touched off a mad rush to the Klondike that transformed a mud flat on a bend in the Yukon River into “the City of Gold”—Dawson City, Yukon Territory. Within months the names of the gold bearing creeks that flowed into the Klondike River—Bonanza, Eldorado, Gold Bottom, Skookum Gulch—were known round the world. By the fall of 1896, a ragged army of men and women was on the march to emulate the good fortune of such instant ‘millionaires’ as George Washington Carmack, Skookum Jim, and Tagish Charley.

Very few of them made it through the mountains that stood between the Klondike and the Pacific Ocean route via Alaska to the gold fields that year. The 22,000 who arrived in Skagway in the summer and fall of 1897 faced not only the Chilkoot Pass (3,500 feet to the summit, with the last 4 miles a 35° slope of ice and drifting snow) but a decree that no-one could set foot in the Yukon Territory unless they were equipped with at least a ton of food and essential supplies. Once over the Pass, the exhausted army had to survive an equally hazardous trip down river from Lake Bennet to Dawson City. When the weird flotilla of home-made rafts, canoes, and boats of every description (7,000 of them) finally arrived that summer, Dawson, with a population now swollen to 30,000, became the most populous city in Canada west of Winnipeg. Although there is no evidence that anyone packed a motion picture camera over the Chilkoot Pass in the Winter of 1897, Robert Bonine was probably in the Klondike as early as the summer of 1898 to record the event for the Edison Company. His films, and the photographs of E.A. Hegg, a professional photographer who did backpack his camera and his supplies over the Pass that memorable winter, convey, as no verbal descriptions can, what life in that instant community, spawned by gold fever, was like.

Everything was for sale in Dawson City, and to accommodate the personal fortunes being created every day all the amenities of western civilization were being introduced to meet the demand. By 1 July, 1897, there were two banks, two newspapers, five churches and an on-again, off-again telephone service available, and by the turn of the century its residents could boast of Arizona Charlies’ Palace Grand, an Opera House, a Public Library, and a range of amusements that would have done credit to any community in North America three times the size. Among the amusements was the motion picture, although little is known about exhibition in Dawson City. There were advertisements for the amazing wonders of the *Animatograph* and the *Projectoscope* as early as the summer of 1898, but no real evidence that these were more than limited presentations by itinerant showmen anxious for their share of the riches that flowed from the creek beds. What is

* *Rescued from the Permafrost* is adapted from an article by Sam Kula published in *American Film* (July 1979)



Front Street, Dawson, Yukon, 1899. (National Film Board 81217)

clear, however, is that the Dawson Amateur Athletic Association, formed in 1902, was adding film shows to its program of amateur and professional theatricals to amuse its members by the end of 1903. The professional performers would have to be shipped South again, even if they had to wait until the weather unlocked the Yukon before they could leave, but neither the exchanges nor the distributors in their turn were prepared to absorb the cost of shipping the films back after their run at the DAAA. For the newsreels, the serials, and the program features of the day, Dawson City became the end of the line.

Although it was highly unlikely that anyone in Dawson would try to pirate their product, it became the practice for distributors to leave the prints in the custody of the Canadian Bank of Commerce, one of the two rival banks racing to be the first to open its doors in June 1897. The Bank, ignorant of or ignoring the fire hazard associated with nitrocellulose base film (the standard stock used in the industry until 1950), stored the growing collection in the basement of the Carnegie Library Building. Since Dawson City lies close enough to the Arctic Circle that the ground is permanently frozen to a depth of between 10 and 15 feet, one can only assume that the basement of the Library, resting on or in the permafrost, approximated the refrigerated storage conditions recommended for nitrate film.

The rest of the story comes from Clifford Thomson, now a resident of Chilliwack, B.C. An employee of the Bank between 1928 and 1932, Mr. Thomson also served as Treasurer of the Hockey Association. It's arena was adjacent to the DAAA and in its centre, somehow, a swimming tank, roughly 20' x 30', had been hacked through the permafrost. Mr. Thomson recalls that the pool was covered by boards before the arena was flooded, but that the ice bulged over the pool area. In the summer of 1929, the decision was made to eliminate the pool and the problem, and on Mr. 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 film history, in all its variety, continued to make its own humble contribution in support of the DAAA's recreational program.

In the Summer of 1978, Dawson City had a permanent population of only 800, and the air of a place frozen in time. Klondike National Historic Sites, the restoration arm of Parks Canada on site, was engaged in documenting and restoring half-a-dozen buildings, while the Klondike Visitors' Association was filling the fully restored Palace Grand and Diamond Tooth Gerties' with as much highlife, evoking the spirit of the place when the gold fever was at its height, as the law and their budget would allow. It was, in fact, in the vacant lot just behind Diamond Tooth Gerties' (Canada's only legal gambling hall) that the nitrate film strike was made.

The DAAA clubhouse and arena had once occupied the site, and workmen testing the soil in preparation for the construction of a civic recreational centre—in Dawson City as elsewhere the wheel moves full circle!—first uncovered a few reels of film. Through the good offices of Mike Gates, Curator of Collections at Klondike National Historic Sites, the find was brought to the attention of the National Film Archives, and when a preliminary exploration indicated that there were dozens, if not hundreds, of reels on the site, the decision was made to excavate. There was not much time for debate as the bulldozers were scheduled to roll in a matter of weeks. At this point, Kathy Jones, Director of the Dawson City Museum, took charge of the project, persuaded the City Manager to delay the start of construction, and negotiated a contract with the National Film Archives to underwrite the cost of the project, all in record time. Under her supervision, a team was assembled and trained in a set of procedures developed for the safe handling of nitrate film. Mike Gates suggested the use of the ice house (tunneled out of the hillside) at Bear Creek Mining Camp, another site under the restoration, as a temporary vault, and this turned out to be an ideal location in the middle of August with temperatures near 25°C.



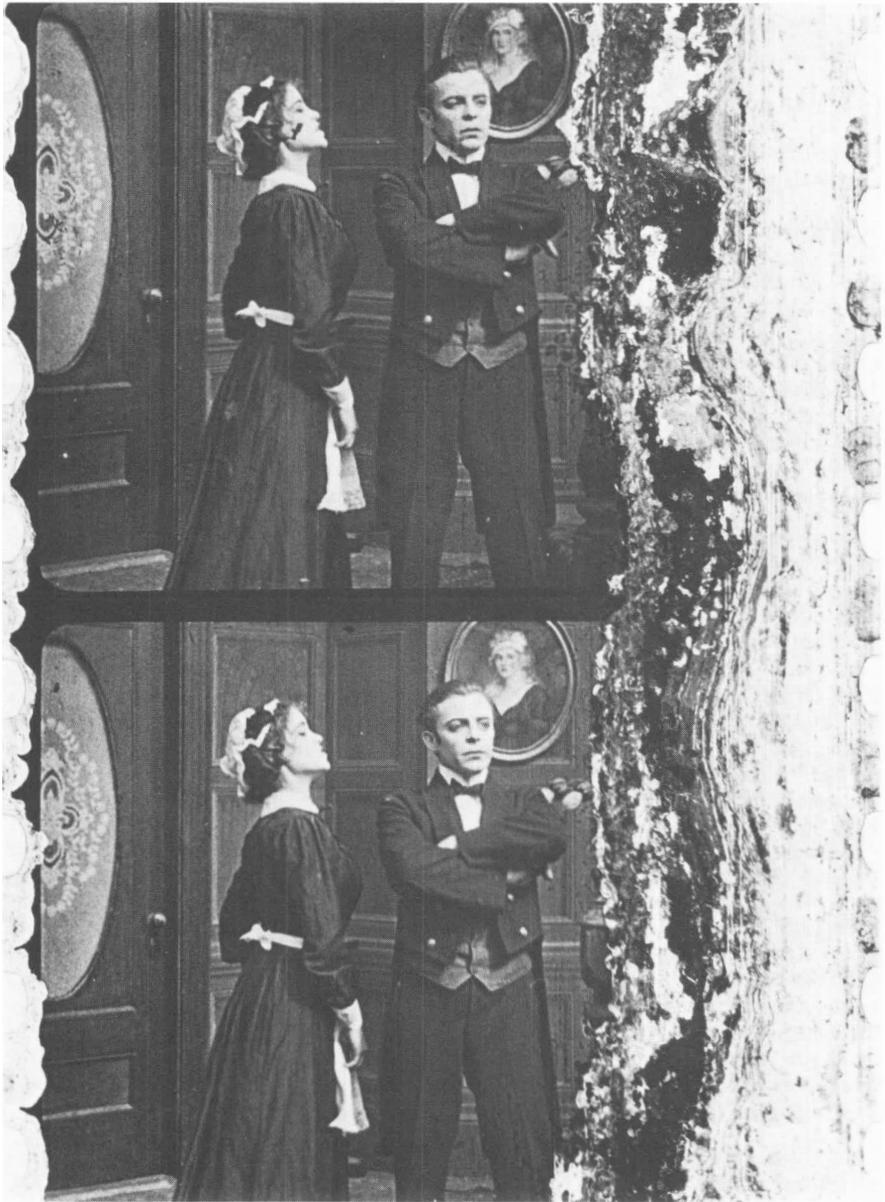
The swimming tank on the site of the Dawson Amateur Athletic Association at the start of the 'dig'. Photograph by Kathy Jones, Dawson City Museum, Yukon.



A reel of the Dawson Collection as it emerged from the excavation. Photograph by Kathy Jones, Dawson City Museum, Yukon.

The first estimates, based on the film that lay close to the surface, was that only a few of the reels could be salvaged, and at that only a small portion of each reel. The base was in surprisingly good shape after nearly fifty years, but ground water seepage from the Spring thaws had bleached most of the image, and the emulsion had been attacked by chemicals in the soil, and in part by chemicals released in the decomposition of the metal reels on which the film was mounted, and of the metal transfer cases (6 to 8 reels to a box) in which the reels were packed. It was not until the end of August, after the *Klondike Korner*, a Dawson City bulletin, carried an item on the 'dig', that Jones and her crew realized that they were dealing with a swimming tank full of film. On seeing the item, Clifford Thomson wrote to Jones to clear up the 'mystery' of how the film came to be buried, and to indicate the extent of the find. At the same time, the film emerging from below the surface was proving to be in much better condition. Many of the reels had leaders and titles in good enough shape to allow positive identification, and some even retained their censor bands (the strip of cardboard that verifies that the film has been licensed for exhibition in the various jurisdictions) and their shipping instructions. The final count when the 'dig' was officially terminated was 510 reels, although a realistic appraisal would place the number of salvageable reels (in whole or in part) at something like 425 reels. The numbers are uncertain at even this late date (31 March 1979) because there are new techniques still being tested that may allow the restoration of reels which are now jelled in a solid mass, suffering from lateral as well as linear shrinkage, or so brittle that the film snaps off, one frame at a time, when an attempt is made to unwind it.

There were formidable problems to solve, however, before any restoration work could take place. The key one was moving the film from Dawson City to the National Film Archives' (NFA) restoration facility in Ottawa. Nitrate film is highly flammable and classed as a hazardous substance that cannot be openly shipped on a common carrier. The NFA had close to one ton of film, after it had been packed, and no means of transporting it some 2,800 miles. The answer, after interminable frustration and delay turned out to be a two stage operation. With the aid of a sympathetic trucker who was prepared to turn a



'The Butler and the Maid'. A frame showing the effects of severe water damage upon the film's emulsion, coupled with the possible start of nitrate decomposition. Enlargement from the Edison Company production, 1912. (Public Archives of Canada)

blind eye on the manifest, the film was moved 350 miles south to Whitehorse. When all else had demonstrably failed, an appeal was made to the Department of National Defense, and in due course of time, and after the film had been repacked in wooden crates lined with tin to comply with regulations, and Air Force Hercules transport lumbered to a stop at Uplands Forces Base and disgorged the Dawson Collection.

The first task was to review the Collection in order to segregate the material into categories based on physical condition. All the film was excessively moist due to the very humidities it had experienced while buried, and the emulsion was encrusted with particles of debris and coated in many cases with chemicals which would eventually attack the image. The first step, therefore, was to rewash all the films that offered any prospects that they could be successfully transferred to safety stock, and thus attempt to stabilize the image. The film would then be dried which would eliminate the excessive moisture as well, and the best means of effecting a transfer could then be determined. Film that demonstrated only minimal shrinkage could be contact printed at a reasonable speed, but film that was shrunk beyond the limits of standard laboratory equipment (and this was the case with the vast bulk of the Dawson Collection) would have to be optically printed one frame at a time (a much slower and much more expensive process), or re-dimensioned through the use of a vacuum tank and chemical treatment so that it would conform to the standard, or, as is the case with a high percentage of the Dawson Collection, both processes.

It was obvious that even 400 reels would tie up the NFA's limited restoration facilities for a year or more (an output of less than one reel a working day is not uncommon with film in an advanced state of decomposition). Help was needed, and in the tradition of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF), to which the NFA and the other organizations belong, the Library of Congress and the American Film Institute offered their assistance. AFI's Larry Karr started the laborious process of checking to see if the prints on the Dawson Collection were already held elsewhere, a fact that would obviously drop a title way down on the list of priorities. Library of Congress' Paul Spehr offered to transfer some 190 reels of U.S. productions, titles that would be valuable additions to the national collection. The work was started in the Library's own restoration facility, but is now being carried on at the National Archives Laboratory while the Library of Congress relocates its facility.

It may well be another year before the value of the Dawson Collection can be properly assessed. What is now clear is that it represents a cross-section of the films in theatrical distribution between 1910 and 1925. The vast majority are Hollywood productions, which is not surprising in view of the almost complete domination of the industry enjoyed by the companies located there in that period. The material ranges over one reel comedies or dramas from such pioneer companies as Edison, Biograph, Vitagraph, Thanhouser, Bluebird and Selig-Polyscope, through serials and newsreels, to feature films. Many of the names are well established (D.W. Griffith, Samuel Goldwyn, Maurice Tourneur, Mack Sennett) as producers and directors, many more would have undoubtedly been better known if more of their films had been available when the histories were written.

If there are any unacknowledged masterpieces in the Dawson Collection, they have not yet made their presence known. A few "lost" films of note such as POLLY OF THE CIRCUS (1917), with Mae Marsh (Sam Goldwyn's first independent production), and WILDFIRE (1915) with Lilian Russell and Lionel Barrymore (Miss Russell's only screen appearance), have turned up, and others, perhaps, remain to be identified. For some reason, the Collection is very strong on serials (THE CRIMSON STAIN, (1916), with Maurice Costello; THE GIRL AND THE GAME (1915-16), with Helen Holmes; PEARL OF THE ARMY (1916), with Pearl White; THE NEGLECTED WIFE (1916-17), with Ruth Roland) although we are not certain at this stage exactly how many of the chapters are in the Collection. As more and more of the unidentified reels are re-conditioned and transferred each serial is becoming more and more of a cliff-hanger as we



Immigrants arriving at Ellis Island, New York. Frame enlargement from British-Canadian Pathe News, c. 1920. (Public Archives of Canada)

finally determine whether or not the last chapter, where the villain is unmasked and all is explained, is a victim or a survivor.

To the film scholar, the fascination of the Collection may lie in the possible significance of little known productions by established figures (PRINCES VIRTUE, with May Murray; BLISS, with Harold Lloyd and Bebe Daniels; THE SCANDAL MONGERS, written and directed by Lois Weber; THE INSPECTOR'S DOUBLE, directed by William Beaudine), but to the archivist and historian the appeal is probably the unknown quantity represented by some 75 reels of newsfilm. Produced primarily between 1913 and 1922 under such titles as Universal Screen Magazine, Gaumont's "The Reel of Real News", Universal Animated Weekly, Pathé Animated Gazette, Universal Current Events, and British Canadian Pathé News, these actualities, as their titles suggest, range far and wide for their subject matter. The majority were produced during the war years (1914-18) and, along with the several reels of "British Government Official News" in the Collection, provide coverage of that conflict and the impact it was having in Canada, England, France and the U.S. The editions of British Canadian Pathé News that turned up in Dawson City are of particular interest because this assemblage of original Canadian 'items' and items drawn from Pathé Frères world-wide network was one of the few successful attempts to introduce Canadian content into the theatrical newsreel. Produced in Montreal by Ernest Ouimet, a pioneer exhibitor and distributor, between 1919 and 1923, no complete editions had been known to exist prior to this find. The reels are thus a significant contribution to the study of Canadian film history quite apart from their content.

No-one familiar with the considerable resources now accessible through the work of film archives throughout the world would seriously argue that the Dawson Collection, or

any one cache of early film, will lead to a wholesale re-write of the histories. Nevertheless, we have learned over the years that, given the harsh reality that more than half the films that were produced in the world prior to 1930 are not known to exist and every film from the silent era is a valuable piece of the mosaic, even when it is at least partially complete it will constitute a vital segment of our common cultural history.



Arrival of Viscount Byng of Vimy at Quebec City to take up his appointment as Governor General of Canada, 12 August 1921. Frame enlargement from British-Canadian Pathe News, 1921. (Public Archives of Canada)

The Dawson Collection is a somewhat bizarre but nonetheless effective reminder that by no means all the early film that has survived has been recovered. If the permafrost of the Klondike can yield up a significant collection after half a century, what treasures may still be locked away in the attics and basements of the nation, and in the forgotten corners of the film industry's vaults?

Sam Kula
National Film Archives

Archives in the Kitchen

Although I didn't know it at the time, I began researching *Out of Old Ontario Kitchens* when I first learned to cook on the hearth. I had little instruction and fended for myself with firewood which demanded smoking embers, heavy and clumsy iron pots, dough which refused to rise and utensils whose function at first was mysterious. A few years later, entrenched in libraries and archives poring over cookbooks and cooking experiences, I was thankful for having had the management of a nineteenth century kitchen. I had a