

MOVING PICTURES

From the 1915 Panama-California Exposition

BY SIBEL MELIK

Along with art and a reconstructed Pueblo village, movies represented New Mexican life at the 1915 Panama-California Exposition. Cameraman Chase Bell spent half of 1914 traveling throughout New Mexico, shooting 35,000 feet of motion picture film intended to showcase the “prosperous and progressive” nature of our new state. It’s safe to say that among the state exhibits at the Expo, only New Mexico made such extensive use of motion pictures.

The project was vast and Bell seemed to be at a new location every few days. There was a government speech in Santa Fe, and a school pageant in Tucumcari. He shot the copper mines at Santa Rita and the coal mines at Dawson. He was stopped by the police when he tried to photograph the Corpus Christi procession [likely in Santa Fe] and surrounded by angry Indians in Taos when filming on San Geronimo Day. To film the new road to Cloudcroft he had a special train assigned him. There were army maneuvers at Deming, Indian dances at Santa Clara, a Retail Dealers convention at Raton, and archaeological excavating at Quarai. The films were to be first presented on January 1, 1915, the opening day of the Exposition, and Bell was still shooting on December 28th. The Board had given Bell and his assistants the name “Santa Fe Motion Picture Company” and once back from the field, the film was developed in a small room in the Capitol building. Waldo Twitchell was given the job of creating the titles and produced numerous titles and a logo for the company, the largest script on the logo being “MADE IN NEW MEXICO.” After the Fair, the film was to be given to the Museum of New Mexico as a permanent record. That was the last heard of it until the 1960s.

—Undated manuscript from the research files in the New Mexico Historical Film Collection at the State Archives of New Mexico. It was likely written by Phil Cooke, perhaps for use as narration during screenings of the silent films.

The idea of using the relatively new technology of motion picture film to promote New Mexico is attributed to Ralph Emerson Twitchell, brother of Waldo C. Twitchell and chairman of the New Mexico Board of Managers for the New Mexico exhibit at the Expo. Ralph Twitchell, known as Colonel Twitchell from his National Guard days, was a railroad attorney, politician, accomplished amateur historian, and an early proponent of statehood and promoter of New Mexico. His military and railroad connections were clearly utilized in the making of the films, with extensive footage of the National Guard drilling at Camp Brookes near Deming.

For the most part, Bell and his crew shot on a static tripod with a fixed lens. These films are best considered as documents, rather than as documentaries. The contemporary viewer may wish for more glimpses of ordinary people and simple street scenes, but it is a marvel that we have these images at all.

After languishing for forty-four years after the Expo closed in January 1917, the lost film was discovered in 1961, but there are conflicting stories as to who found it and where. Apparently a few people had heard of the missing film and went looking for it. Tex Roberts, a former executive editor





of *New Mexico Magazine* and former assistant director of the New Mexico Department of Development, wrote a letter to Phil Cooke dated October 13, 1969, explaining his version of events: “A film producer and I risked our lives handling instable [sic] explosive 1914 celluloid film, which I found was being stored in the basement of the Capitol in the furnace room. It is a wonder it did not burn the place down.”

Another document says that the film was found in the boiler room of the Museum of Art in Santa Fe by Edward Pidgeon of the Department of Development. In the end, less than 15 percent of the original, highly flammable and explosive nitrate film was salvageable.

The recovered film found its way to Joseph Halpin for safekeeping at the State Records Center and Archives, which had been established just a few years prior, in 1959. Pidgeon and Halpin, the first state records administrator, took the film to a lab in Albuquerque, where it was transferred to 16 mm safety film. The dangerous nitrate original was destroyed.

Three 16 mm negatives, totaling 2,400 feet* of material, were made from the salvaged film, and many prints were struck from the negatives, with titles like “East Side,” “West Side,” “Parade of Farm Machinery,” “Curry County Views,” “Albuquerque State Fair and Parade,” and “Albuquerque and Santa Fe.”

In 1969 New Mexico Governor David Cargo appointed Philip St. John Cooke to the newly created position of state film archivist and historian at the State Archives, and the Panama-California Expo films became the first films in the New Mexico Historical Film Collection under his care. Later that

year and through 1970, Cooke and Halpin took film prints made from the new negatives on a road show throughout the state and showed them to local audiences in high school auditoriums and libraries. Local luminaries and the general public were invited to attend the screenings and to help identify people and locations in the films.

There are now twenty-five prints in the climate-controlled vault at the State Archives. It appears that master prints were struck from the new negatives and additional copies made from those masters. The prints do not match up exactly with the negative masters; this is a mystery that still needs to be unraveled.

Although the Corpus Christi procession and San Geronimo footage do not exist within the Panama-California films copied to 16 mm in 1961, a recent gift of films to the State Archives by California donor Jeff Vilencia, which appear to be from the same period, includes a reel showing both the Corpus Christi procession and a San Geronimo sequence at Taos Pueblo. It is possible that this material was shot by Chase Bell for the Expo.

Most of the information in this article comes from notes, letters, and manuscripts in Folder 51, Serial Number 23740, in the research files of the New Mexico Historical Film Collection. Other materials pertaining to the exposition in the holdings of the State Archives include the final report on the New Mexico exhibit of the Panama-California Exposition, 1917, by the Board of Managers to Governor Lindsey (Governor Washington E. Lindsey Papers, Collection No. 1959-096). There are also letters from Twitchell to James J. Shuler, a physician and mayor of Raton, about the exposition (Shuler-Berninghaus Papers, Collection No. 1960-036).

View the videos at: www.elpalacio.org/panama-expo.php

The State Archives of New Mexico, a division of the New Mexico Commission of Public Records, is located at 1209 Camino Carlos Rey in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Please call 505 476-7948 to make an appointment to view the films or to order DVD copies.

**2,400 feet of 16 mm at silent speed, or eighteen frames per second, would have a running time of one hour and 28 minutes, although most projectors are not variable speed and can only run film at the sound-film speed of twenty-four frames per second—hence the sped-up, herky-jerky movement that one often sees in silent films. 35,000 feet of 35 mm film would have a running time of eight and a half hours.*