

Donnerwood: The History of Early Filming in Truckee

By Corri Jimenez

As early as 1910, silent screen films to motion picture “talkies” have been produced in and around the Truckee area. Out of the nearly 100 films produced on Donner Summit, 80 films were produced in Truckee during its heyday, 1914 to 1936.

Since its beginning, Truckee was an ideal film location for Hollywood movie industries having numerous amenities such as lodging for movie crews, mountainous terrain, wintery snow loads and access via the Southern Pacific Railroad. In addition, Truckee businesses promoted these amenities during this period. In the 1920s, the Truckee Motion Picture Association solicited movie companies to the area and was endorsed by the Southern Pacific Railroad. The advertisement read:

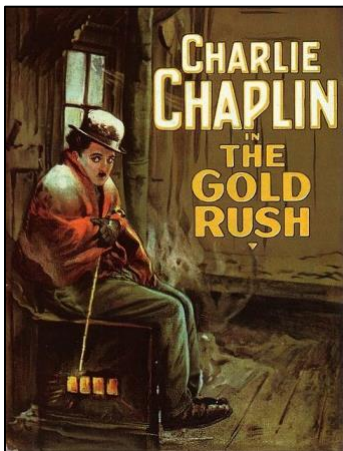
In the Lake Tahoe region, the Donner Lake country, the vast number of smaller lakes surrounding her, Truckee is the center of the most amazing variety of scenic shots.			
Pine clad forests and open views, sage brush plains, and long Siberian wastes: river and lake scenes without number, covered with deep or shallow snow, open or frozen over.			
Canoe shots	Gorges	Ski jumps	Cliff jumps
Rapids	Dams	Saw Mills	Toboggans
Skating	Snow sports	Bridges	Dog trails
Dog teams	Wind machines	Sleighs	Saddle horses
Landing field (bordered with lights and a beacon).			
Meadows	Plateaus	Peaks and Canyons	
Also Lumber yards, Quaint street, Variety of buildings, Carpenters, Helpers, extras in any number - Comfortable hotels, Supplies and Cabins.			
In fact if the Motion Pictures need it, Truckee has, or will, secure it.			
Southern Pacific's main line, makes his vast country easily accessible, regardless of weather conditions.			
Alaska, Canada and Siberia, boast of no better transportation in the line of sled dogs, bob sleighs, horses, etc. and cannot surpass the variety of scenes that are frequently required in snow sequences.			
The “Gold Rush”, “Winds of Chance”, “Over the Border”, “The Snow Shoe Trail”, “Behold My Wife”, “Smoke Beleau”, “Burning Daylight”, “The Big Game”, “The Golden Snare”, “The Tempest”, “The Red Dancer”, “The Hands of Nera”, “The Iron Horse” are but a few of the many snow sequences filmed here.			
Truckee has “doubled” for Alaska, Canada, Siberia, Switzerland, Maine, Vermont, North and South Carolina, and many other climes this side of the tropics, both winter and summer.			
The races in which many famous dog teams will compete, bringing thousands of sportsmen, will add much color to the atmosphere and make many potential extras available.			
For further information or additional views, phone or write Mr. H.P. Monahan, Los Angeles General Office, Southern Pacific Company or any Southern Pacific Agent nearest you.			
W.L. Maynard, Southern Pacific Hotel, Truckee, California.			

Caption: Movie advertisement from W.L. Maynard, Southern Pacific Hotel (Located at <https://www.truckeehistory.org/uploads/5/1/9/2/51923135/flieradvertisingtruckeeasmovievenue.jpg>, retyped by C. Jimenez).

With the railroad’s endorsement, the silent screen films in the area boomed between 1919-1925 and 48 movies were filmed in the area ranging from dramas to westerns. In 1923 alone, there were 15 movies filmed in Truckee.

One silent film commemorating the 55th anniversary of the Transcontinental Railroad is the 1924 film “The Iron Horse,” produced by Director John Ford. The film’s storyline is full of melodrama, such as Native American Indian attacks, railroad worker strikes, evil villains, and beautiful damsels. Filmed on Donner Summit, the movie crew employed 250 Chinese workers who re-enacted drilling scenes with historical accuracy and some were descendants of original railroad workers. Steam engines were physically hauled and dissembled to create many scenes within the movie. The movie is considered one of the biggest hits of the silent screen era and a top grossing film of 1924 with \$2 million in revenue. In 2011, the film was listed on the National Film Registry.

Produced in 1925, Charlie Chaplin directed and filmed “The Gold Rush” on Donner Summit. This movie was themed on the 1890s Klondike Gold Rush to Alaska. The film starred Chaplin, as the Little Tramp, and Hollywood sweethearts, Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. As a slapstick comedy, the storyline incorporated hardship, starvation, cannibalism, and debuted Chaplin’s famous “roll dance”. The filming on Donner took a total of two weeks and had 600 extras that were transported from Sacramento to Truckee by train. The film was a blockbuster and grossed \$4 million worldwide. The film was also depicted on a brick building in Truckee’s Commercial Row as a memorial to Chaplin and his film.



Caption: The Gold Rush Movie poster (left) (www.imdb.com); Chaplin and his movie crew on scene (right) (Truckee Donner Historical Society).

In 1934, the first ‘talkie,’ “Murder in the Private Car,” was filmed in Truckee. Like Ford’s film, it had a railroad theme to it that involved a tycoon daughter and murder. The film had a little slapstick to it that had pre-CGI technology, and starred a young Sterling Holloway (aka the voice of Disney’s “Winnie the Pooh”).

In addition to actual films, prominent author Jack London wrote movie scripts off his popular novels and short stories that were filmed in Truckee. “An Odyssey of the North” (1914) and the “Burning Daylight” series (1914) are two silent films that debuted prior to his death in 1916. Other movies produced after his death filmed in Truckee include “Son of the Wolf” (1922), “Call of the Wild” (1923), and “White Fang” (1936).

Sidebar:

- For more information and a list of summer activities going on in Truckee to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the Transcontinental Railroad go to <https://goldspike.org> or the Facebook page: Donner Summit-Truckee Golden Spike Celebration.

About the author:

Corri Jimenez is an architectural historian and historic preservation professional working in the Tahoe area. For more information, see Guy Coates article, “The Film Mecca of the Sierras” (www.truckeehistory.org/the-film-mecca-of-the-sierras) or check out Donner Summit Historical Society *Heirloom* newsletters (March 2009, August 2011, and January 2018) at www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/Newsletters). These historic silent films, such as “The Gold Rush,” “The Iron Horse,” and “Murder in the Private Car,” can be viewed on www.Youtube.com.