

Early Filmmaking in the Meadow City

By John Raymond Armijo for the New Mexico Film Office

“The heroes wore loud-checked caps, the vamps, lots of heavy jewelry, and the heroines, long curls, middy blouses and baby-doll slippers, and the villains mostly wore sinister leers.” Lillian J. Sweetser- Scriptwriter (1910-1915)

In 1913, Las Vegas was a bustling cosmopolitan oasis on the Santa Fe Trail, and the Hub of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad. Victorian, Queen Anne, Italianate, and Romanesque Revival architecture lined the streets in every direction an electric trolley car or one's footsteps could take them. Las Vegas had two motion picture theaters, the Browne and Photoplay, and the Duncan Opera House was a world-class venue for opera, stage plays, and vaudeville acts. And soon, Las Vegas would become a backdrop for the nascent motion picture industry. The first to arrive was Lubin Films Southwest Location Company who had been filming in Silver City where they produced 14 films. Lubin Films headquartered in Philadelphia was the first major studio to send a complete company on a sustained tour of the Southwest. The location company was under the guidance of Romaine Fielding, lead actor, director, writer and manager. Toward the end of their three-month stay in Silver City (May-July), Fielding's popularity skyrocketed when the *Motion Picture Story Magazine* (July 1913) reported that movie fans had voted him "The Most Popular Photoplayer in America." Box-office stars like Mary Pickford, Francis X. Bushman, Bronco Billy, and other favorites didn't even come close in the voting.

If the name Romaine Fielding doesn't ring a bell you are not alone. Even though his contributions to the silent cinema were many, today, he is barely a footnote in American film history.

Within a week, Fielding had rented the S. A. Clement house (920 Gallinas St.) and the lot next-door, for his new studio. A few weeks later, he leased the Plaza Hotel (built in 1884) and changed the name to Hotel Romaine-the name is still visible on the side of the hotel! The hotel doubled as a business and as accommodations for his cast and

crew some who traveled from New Orleans, New York and Philadelphia to work in his Vegas productions.

Fielding's first two Vegas films, *The Rattlesnake* and *The Harmless One* were hailed as "masterpieces" by the local and national press. To ensure that everyone got to see them the night of their premiere, the Browne and Photoplay screened them simultaneously. They did the same when the outpouring to see a "Fielding Night" double feature of *The Clod* and *The Fatal Scar* (both shot in Silver City) was so great that each screening was accompanied by the Bistolfi and Simison orchestras. *The Harmless One* included several scenes on board Las Vegas' electric streetcar railway (1904-1937). In 2004, the *Las Vegas Daily Optic* interviewed Alice Hansen who was visiting from her home in San Diego, because when she was 15 months old, Fielding cast her in *The Harmless One*. Footage of her silent film debut exists today. Her parents, John and Goldie Mae Oerline, lived next door to Fielding's studio on Gallinas street. Goldie Mae kept Fielding and his crew supplied with her fresh baked lemon crème pies which she sold for a dollar a pie! Not too shabby for 1913. Her father, employed by the Santa Fe Railroad, did odd jobs for Fielding, and he was the snake wrangler on *The Rattlesnake*.

Fielding hired Las Vegas Jeanette Spiess to write the script for *Hiawanda's Cross*, and he hired local actors Rose Powers, Chella Van Petten, Ethel Danzinger, Hans Lewis to act in the film, and Carl Ifeld appeared as an Extra. Guadalupe Garcia, then 13 years old, appeared as an Extra in Fielding's last Vegas film, *The Golden God*.

By the end of October, after completing nine films, Fielding began pre-production on *The Golden God* a five-reel futuristic drama about the struggle between capital and labor that takes place in 1950, and with a budget of \$50,000 it was one of the most expensive films, made in 1913. The *Optic* reported that Fielding orchestrated a realistic choreography of war using a cacophony of bombs blasting everywhere amidst a mob storming head-on to battle soldiers, tanks, armored vehicles, machine guns, and aerial bombardment (the first airplane to fly in Vegas). The *Optic* reported that Fielding spent \$15,000 on ammunition, powder and explosives, and hired five thousand extras at \$2.00 each per day and \$2.50 if they brought a horse. U.S. Calvary and Infantry Company H and Troop A, and 100s of horses, participated in the battle scenes that took 17 days to shoot. The *Optic* also reported that the AT&SF brought in hundreds of spectators, daily,

to witness the spectacle. For the climatic scenes Mayor R. J. Taupert issued a "movie holiday" so that everyone could participate as extras or as spectators.

Unfortunately the National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures rejected *The Golden God* because of its inflammatory nature, and was never released. That same year a fire at Lubin Films film vaults in Philadelphia destroyed hundreds of films, including, *The Golden God*. Perhaps, had the film survived, it would have cemented Fielding's place in film history, but alas, we'll never know.

Fielding and company left Las Vegas in early December (1913) never to return again. He produced 10 films in Las Vegas.

The next wave of filmmaking came in 1915 with a bang when the Selig Polyscope Company of Los Angeles and their star attraction Tom Mix arrived on June 30, 1915 aboard AT&SF train #2. They were greeted at the station by a throng of spectators complete with a band and mounted cowboys to escort them into town.

After numerous attempts by the Commercial Club and local merchant Ludwig W. Ifeld to get his friend Romaine Fielding back to Las Vegas failed, they turned their marketing attention towards California and New York studios. The Commercial Club launched their print campaign in January (1915) in the *New York Dramatic Mirror* and *Motion Picture World*. An article in *Motion Picture World* (March) praised Las Vegas' print campaign and credits them for being pioneers in the promotion of their locale. On April 6, 1915, Ifeld and his wife traveled to California to investigate one of the nineteen proposals that motion picture companies made concerning Las Vegas as a motion picture center. While in Los Angeles, they met Selig Polyscope's (1896-1918) star attraction, Tom Mix, who they persuaded to visit Las Vegas during the Rough Rider's Reunion and Rodeo.

The Selig Company carpenters began construction on sets, stages, and corrals on July 2nd at Fielding's old studio on Gallinas street. The Browne Theater launched a series of Tom Mix films that played nightly to the delight of audiences. At the screening of *Pals in Blue* Mix addressed the audience and asked that Las Vegans treat him like an ordinary citizen. The audience took immediately to Mix. Not missing a beat the Commercial Club hosted a gala reception for the film company at their office in the Masonic building. One can only speculate about the ambiance at the reception, but it

must have been a tremendous relief to the Commercial Club that their effort to attract filmmaking to their community was right on target.

In July, articles about Las Vegas' scenic charm and warm reception for the Selig filmmakers appeared in the New York City trades (*Moving Picture World*, *Motion Picture News*, and *Motography*). In between films, the cast and crew often visited schools where they performed rope tricks, riding stunts, and sharp shooting exhibitions to the amazement and cheers of everyone there.

Tom Mix was the star and writer of all the films he made in Las Vegas. His leading lady was the gifted actress Victoria Forde who he married after leaving Las Vegas. Tom Mix completed his first Vegas film *Never Again* on July 21. It starred future comedy great Oliver Hardy. There is some debate as to how many films Tom Mix made in Vegas but it's somewhere in the 20-40 range. Tom Mix's last film was a gift to the Las Vegas Fire Department. The documentary was about the everyday life of the firefighters.

Forty-seven years later Las Vegas was the location for another phenomenon – Television. In 1962, Screen Gems shot 13 episodes of a new TV series called *Empire*, in New Mexico. And it was the only TV series in the 1962 fall television schedule that was filmed in color and on location. The only filming that we know about took place at Storrie Lake. If you know of any other Vegas locations please let me know. The other locations they filmed at included Santa Fe, Swan Lake near Espanola, and San Ildefonso Pueblo. The series regulars were Richard Egan, Anne Seymour, Terry Moore, Ryan O'Neal, Charles Bronson, James Gregory, Warren Vanders.

About the author

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