

FROM THE KLONDIKE TO HOLLYWOOD

Discovered films uncover moments in motion picture history

By Michael Gates

Photos by Kathy Jones-Gates

The reels of silent movie films had been buried in permafrost for almost 50 years when they were discovered.

When the old hockey rink at Queen Street and Fifth Avenue in Dawson City was torn down, in 1978, old movie reels emerged from beneath where it had once stood. At the time, I was curator of collections for Parks Canada in Dawson and asked to take a look at this unusual discovery.

The films were made from highly flammable cellulose nitrate, which was the standard medium for silent movies in the early days. After several phone calls, I reached Sam Kula, the director of the National Film, Television, and Sound Archives in Ottawa, Ont. Kula was intrigued and flew to Dawson City to examine what was being unearthed.

He decided these old films were worth salvaging, and since it was easier for him to arrange a contract with a non-government agency, Kula notified Kathy Jones, the director of the Dawson City Museum. Amid the rubble in the excavation, Jones, Kula, and I devised a plan to salvage and identify the films. They would be stored temporarily in an old root cellar in the abandoned Bear Creek industrial mining camp, 10 kilometres outside of Dawson. By the end of the summer, hundreds of reels had been recovered and catalogued.

Along with the discovery of the reels, the mystery of how the films came to be buried was also revealed. In 1929, Clifford Thompson, a young employee with the Canadian Bank of Commerce (which acted as the local film distributor in Dawson City) had to remove thousands of reels stored in the basement of the Carnegie Library on Queen Street. He had them hauled down the street to the Dawson Amateur Athletic Association building and thrown into an obsolete indoor swimming pool that was being filled in. There, the film lay buried for 49 years until it was decided to build a new recreation facility on the site.

When Jones sent the compilation of what had been uncovered to Kula in Ottawa, the story made headlines around the world. Over the decades, most of the highly unstable and flammable films of the silent era had been lost in massive warehouse fires or due to decay. The films recovered in Dawson represent a marvellous cross-section of what was shown in theatres between 1905 and 1925.

Transporting the films to Ottawa was a dramatic event. Nitrate films are classified as hazardous product; commercial carriers are not allowed to transport them. The solution: the Canadian Armed Forces. On Nov. 11, 1978, the reels were delivered to the National Film Archives in a Hercules transport aircraft.

The collection includes Hollywood classics and newsreels with Canadian content. The Hollywood films contain a veritable who's who of the early film



Sam Kula (left) and Michael Gates examine reels.



The excavation site in 1978.



Photo: Hippocrite Films, Dawson City Museum, Library and Archives Canada

Water seeped into the edges of the film reels causing the characteristic damage along the margins of the images.

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Photo: Hippocrite Films, Library of Congress

One of the earliest moving pictures ever taken in the Yukon of mining on Hunter Creek.



Photo: Hippocrite Films, Dawson City Museum, Library and Archives Canada

Image from the 1917 film *Polly of the Circus*.

era, with motion pictures like *Wildfire*, starring Lionel Barrymore and Lillian Russell, *The Half-Breed*, starring Douglas Fairbanks, and *Pearl of the Army*, featuring Pearl White. There's also *Polly of the Circus*, starring movie idol Mae Marsh. The 1917 film was the first independent production by a young Samuel Goldwyn, who went on to be a prominent movie mogul. Also represented in the collection is Mack Sennett, the Canadian-born director and actor known as the “King of Comedy.”

The newsreel content is equally impressive, with scenes of immigrants landing at Ellis Island, World War I footage, Alexander Graham Bell’s record-breaking hydrofoil watercraft, boxing matches, and baseball games. The sports footage even includes rare coverage of the scandalous 1919 World Series in which members of the Chicago White Sox were paid by gamblers to intentionally lose games.

Canada’s National Archives kept the newsreels, while the U.S. Library of Congress took the Hollywood films. The collection and its content languished for 35 years until it was spotted by New York filmmaker Bill Morrison, who was researching for a documentary. His film *Dawson City: Frozen Time* reveals the remarkable connections between the Klondike, where some of the earliest moving films were fea-

tured in 1898, and the nascent film industry of Hollywood.

Morrison’s documentary highlights how Alexander Pantages, manager of the Orpheum on Front Street in Dawson, later created a chain of movie theatres across the continent. In fact, the Academy Awards were presented at the Pantages Theatre, in Hollywood, from 1950 to 1960. Also featured is showman Sid Grauman (of Hollywood’s Grauman’s Chinese Theatre fame), who was a young lad in Dawson City during the gold-rush era. Noted Hollywood screenwriter Wilson Mizner was there, too.

Marjorie Rambeau, whose name appears on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and was twice nominated for Best Supporting Actress at the Academy Awards, spent a winter performing in Dawson City. Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle appeared on stage in the Klondike (and later on screen in the 1913 comedy *Fatty’s Day Off*) before becoming a movie star with a million-dollar contract. And William Desmond Taylor, a time-keeper with the Yukon Gold Company, went on to direct 60 Hollywood films. In July 1922, his silent drama *Soul of Youth* screened in Dawson City, five months after he was mysteriously murdered.

Dawson City: Frozen Time also delves into social history, taking viewers from the First Nation settlement at Tr’ochëk, through the heyday of the Klondike Gold Rush, and the later corporatization and decline of Dawson City. Intertwined are stories from people who still live in the Yukon today, providing further connections between the past and present.

The two-hour documentary premiered in September 2016 at the Venice Film Festival, followed by a screening at the New York Film Festival a month later. It was also featured in the online edition of *Vanity Fair* magazine.

The attention is deserved as Morrison’s film has woven together many disparate strands to create an unforgettable visual, musical, and historical tapestry. And it sheds light on the fact that the Dawson City film find was undoubtedly a bizarre, yet incredible discovery. **Y**