

## **A History of Boston Films**

by Stephen Kharfen

As we watch these historic films, we feel as if we are floating in a canoe on the Charles River; diving into the frigid waters of Boston Harbor; and riding the streetcar along Boylston Street into Copley Square past the Boston Public Library. For these brief moments, we share the view of the people of Boston and Massachusetts at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These are among the very first films of the city ever made.

These movies transport us to a far off time and place in the uniquely captivating way of the silver screen. They allow us to observe the attire, manners, and details of life as it unfolded one hundred years ago. The story of how these movies survived is itself quite remarkable.

The 1890s saw the dawn of the motion picture, a new technology, a new art form, a new means of recording and creating history. The American film industry can be said to have begun on April 14, 1894 in New York with the opening of the first kinetoscope parlor. The kinetoscope was Thomas Edison's peephole film viewing machine. The first commercially successful projection of movies occurred on April 23, 1896 at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York using Edison's Vitascope projector. Just weeks later, Benjamin Franklin Keith, the leading vaudeville impresario in the nation, debuted the Vitascope in Boston on May 18, 1896 at his theatre on 547 Washington Street.

Touting the event as a wonderful spectacle, *The Boston Herald* of the next day reported: "The Vitascope is going to be the greatest drawing card of the season. Its possibilities are unlimited. Just think what it means. The scenes shown are full of life and action, simply lacking in vocalization. To describe the enthusiasm aroused would be impossible. Worthy professors and scientific men vied with grocery clerks in the warmth of their applause."

Boston's first theatre specifically for movies, the Theatre Comique, opened on Sept. 3, 1906 at 14 Tremont Row in Scollay Square.

Within this earliest timeframe of motion picture history, a typical program mainly consisted of brief films of real life and some story and entertainment films. Cameramen traveled the country to shoot scenic views to be shown in local theatres and for general distribution. Several of these films, such as *Seeing Boston*, were produced this way.

The two main film companies of the early motion picture business, the Edison Company and the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, produced all four movies.

A major figure in the history of the movies shot two of them. G.W. "Billy" Bitzer, who was born in Roxbury in 1872, was the leading cinematographer of the first period of the cinema. He spent most of 1899 filming scenes in and around Boston and returned in 1905 when he shot *Seeing Boston*. He also filmed *Midwinter Bathing*, *L Street Bath*, *Boston*. Bitzer made major contributions to the motion picture arts and sciences and

worked with director D.W. Griffith for 16 years; yet he used his talents to film the terribly racist and inexcusably offensive *Birth of a Nation*, which the NAACP immediately and effectively protested.

There is an irony of history behind our being able to view these glimpses of early cinema.

Before U.S. copyright law included movies in 1912, motion picture companies registered their films as photographs by submitting them on paper rolls to the Copyright Office at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. They were rediscovered in a cellar in the 1930s, and efforts were made to rephotograph them so they could be projected and studied. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences took part in this project, which the Library of Congress completed in the 1960s. These paper rolls became known as the paper prints.

The Paper Print Collection at the Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division of the Library of Congress is the world's largest collection of early films, consisting of over 3,000 movies produced between 1893 and 1915. Due to that omission in the copyright law, we have this treasure for examining life at the turn of the century. Otherwise, they would probably have been lost, like most of the movies of the initial decades of the movies.

In 1954, the Boston Public Library commemorated its centennial. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences donated copies of several paper prints of Boston, including *Panoramic View of Boston Subway from an Electric Car* and *Seeing Boston*, to the Library as part of that celebration.

These movies are just a tiny portion of the Boston Public Library's vast and rich resources on the history of the city and motion pictures.

There are VHS copies of these and more early films of Boston available for checking out in the Library's Audio-Visual Department under the title, *Boston Public Library, Boston Films*.

We hope you enjoy this journey into the history of Boston, the Bay State and the nation via the magic of the movies.

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