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'The Birth of a Nation' Plagued by Money Headaches From Start

Second of Three Articles

By BOB THOMAS

1954

HOLLYWOOD, Dec. 14.—On the Fourth of July, 1914, a movie maker named David Wark Griffith began a project that was to help build a new industry and startle the Nation.

After six weeks of rehearsal, Griffith began the filming of a movie that was to become famous as "The Birth of a Nation." He picked a significant day for it. For his film was to mark the independence of the movie industry from the stage and all other forms of entertainment.

The story was dear to Griffith's heart. He had been born into a poor Kentucky family in 1880, his father having been a loud-voiced Confederate colonel, nicknamed "Thunder Jake." His father had instilled in David the pride of the South, as well as some of its prejudices.

When he began writing and directing movies in 1907, Griffith soon showed his genius. He became the spark of the Biograph company, grinding out

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY

Janet Gaynor and Lew Ayres are costarring in "Servant's Entrance" at the Paramount.

dozens of films a year. Starting with potboilers like "The Adventures of Dolly" and "The Bandit's Waterloo," he kept refining his methods until he turned out classics like "The Taming of the Shrew" and "Enoch Arden."

AIMS HIGHER

He yearned for something greater. A writer told him about the Thomas Dixon novel, "The Clansman." Another company had started making a film from it, but had given it up.

Griffith, enthused over the story, which told of the Civil War and Reconstruction from a Southern viewpoint. He bought the rights, along with another Dixon book, "The Leopard's Spots." He added to the story his own remembrances of life in the postwar South.

The picture was a headache from the start. It was far bigger than any other film yet made, and money was a constant problem. Lacking the money for an outright purchase, Griffith gave Dixon \$2,500, plus 25 per cent of the profits.

Watch for Wood Soanes' Curtain Calls Column Sunday

"We were always running out of money," recalls Raoul Walsh, who acted in the film and is now a movie director. "Then we'd have to stop and turn out some one and two-reelers in order to get some more ready cash."

EXPENSES ENORMOUS

Expenses were enormous for those times. The Battle of Petersburg was staged on an area five miles across with two armies said to amount to 18,000 men. The war in Europe presented further troubles. Griffith had difficulty rounding up enough horses. Bed sheets were also scarce, and he needed hundreds for the Ku Klux Klan scenes.

Griffith hocked everything he owned. But it still wasn't enough. He was forced to sell rights to the film to theater men

FORTY YEARS AGO TODAY

"The Trans-Atlantic Trio" is on the Orpheum bill.

in certain states. One operator put up the final \$35,000 to finish it. Donald Crisp, who also appeared in the film, estimates that the moneyman earned \$5,500,000 from his investment.

The movie was finally finished after nine weeks of shooting. The cost: \$110,000. That was five times what any previous film had cost, but it would scarcely pay for the cheapest quickie today.

The final product ran two hours and 45 minutes on the screen. This was assailed as "a frightful waste and audacious monstrosity," which shows how far Griffith was ahead of his time.

MANY 'FIRSTS'

It was the first movie to sell reserved seats, to charge \$2 a head, to have scheduled performances, to offer programs, to

feature an orchestral overture and its own musical score.

The film was still called "The Clansman" when it opened Feb. 8, 1915, at Clune's Auditorium in Los Angeles. Some authorities claim Dixon saw it in New York and exclaimed that it needed a less tame title. Crisp declares that a visiting Englishwoman remarked that the film depicted "the birth of your nation."

At any rate, it opened in New York March 3, 1915, as "The Birth of a Nation." And from its premiere, it was destined to have a stormy history.

Tomorrow: The furor over "The Birth of a Nation," which continues to this day. How much money did it make?