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HOLLYWOOD'S GREEN YEARS

Once there were directors and actors who didn't know a guava from an unbranded llama, but in 1947 it begins to look as if the moving picture is here to stay

By Richard G. Hubler

THIRTY-FIVE years ago the price for scripts was $25. A good salary for an executive was $50 a week. An expensive picture was one that cost $500. The salaries of actors ranged from $75 to $125 a week. Directors were paid $150. Cameramen got $80. There were no "producers."

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EACH day's shooting commenced with a hunt—to find a spectacular place at which to kill the villain. This was usually a high cliff. Fifty feet of the heroine in the hero's arms were shot and a 20-foot walk into the sunset. Then the whole company sat down and figured out the first part of the production. The universal motto was, "Do and die first. Reason why later."

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SOME of the titles give the general tone: *Rattlesnakes and Gunpowder, The Desert Flower, The Poisoned Plume.* The word *brand* was always used in epics, such as *The Brand of Cain* or *The Mysterious Brand.* A number of Westerns were dubbed *Calamity Jane's Ranch, Calamity Jane's Mule,* and so on. The last of the series was *Calamity Jane's Calamity.*

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EXTRA players got $1.50 a day. The good ones were put under contract at $10 a week. If they performed stunts such as jumping over a cliff, wrestling a berserk steer, or swimming a river in flood, they got $1 extra.

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THERE were no doubles. If the script called for the hero to fall from a precipice, he fell personally, usually either into the sea or a rented haystack. In one saga the leading man was strung up by the neck to be rescued in the nick of time by a posse. The horse on which he was sitting bolted. The hero was literally hung for a few moments. He got a sore neck and asked for a raise.

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PRODUCTION averaged three pictures a week, each one reel long. The cost was on an average of $250 for each. Printing, overhead, and distribution costs ran the total to about $1,000. Two thousand theaters showed the pictures. They were seen by 1,000,000 people a week. Nearly all were Westerns, and the "Flying A" series was the most popular.

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THE famous corner of Hollywood and Vine was a crossroads in the country. The renowned Wilshire Boulevard was a lane in the backwoods bordered by fruit trees. The headquarters of one film company was an abandoned ostrich ranch in Santa Barbara.

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IN 1909 the American Film Company, one of the pioneer firms, sent its first unit to California. No word came back. A scout, sent to locate the company, found it in San Juan Capistrano with the swallows. The director had become a confirmed drunkard, the actors were broke and stranded. The scout advised AFC headquarters in Chicago of the situation. The return wire read: WE WANT PICTURES. MAKE UP STORY AND DIRECT IT. He did.

This occurred in the era of the earliest two-reelers.

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DISSOLVES and fadeouts were manufactured inside the cameras. A dissolve was made by taking off the reel, rewinding a few feet in the darkroom, replacing it, and shooting the next scene in superimposition. Fadeouts were made by gradually closing down the lens and gradually opening it up on the next scene.

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THE first montage was concocted to illustrate Thomas Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*. One verse required 26 separate scenes, each to be dissolved into the next. This necessitated extremely careful dismounting, rewinding, and shooting.

On the 25th rewind the cameraman had a nervous breakdown. The director was forced to finish shooting the remainder of his own picture.

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THE first two-reeler ever shot was called *Oil on Troubled Waters*. The story: the heroine owned oil wells in the sea off California. The villain coveted them. The brave young engineer arrived just in time. The inevitable big fight came when the hero was personally drilling a new well from a rowboat and the villain swam out to give him the business. The hero sat on the villain in the water and drowned him.

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HUNDREDS of indignant letters were received when the first two-reeler was exhibited. Opinion was summed up in one of the notes from a minister: "It is morally degrading to have a motion picture more than one reel in length."

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THOUSANDS of requests were made for the photographs of stars. The stars obliged. They charged their fans 25 cents apiece for a picture. Each cost the star 10 cents. The 15-cent profit per still picture usually totalled more per week than salary.

Only one director—Allan Dwan—has worked continuously in motion pictures from 1909 to 1947. His salary has ascended from $50 a week to a flat $1,000,000 a year. He has made more than 1250 pictures of all lengths, colors, and kinds. His productions have earned more than $500,000,000 at the box office.

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THE Pathé was then the only good motion picture camera. It was hand-cranked to the spoken rhythm of "101,101,101," and a patent was claimed on it by the early Biograph and Vitagraph companies. It was difficult to get one of these cameras. Hijacking was often resorted to. Expert riflemen were sometimes planted in the hills about a location and more than once an "illegal" cam-

era was shot full of holes.

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THE director talked constantly during shooting. A typical scene: "Come in, Kerrigan (J. M. Kerrigan was an early favorite in pictures). Go to the table. Pick up a book. Look for something in it. You don't find it. You're mad. Put it down. Hard. Now turn toward the fireplace. Walk slowly. Still mad. Take out a cigarette. Light a match. Light the cigarette. Put out the match. Cross to the window. You see someone coming. Someone you love. You look at the door expectantly. All right, come in, Jessalyn (Jessalyn van Trump was one of the first leading ladies). Go to each other. You embrace. You kiss. Hold it. Hold it. You're saying good-by. All right, Kerrigan, get out. Get out!" If the hero didn't get out fast enough, the cameraman simply slowed his cranking. Projected at normal speed on the screen, it looked as if the hero had been yanked out.

The director cut the negative, holding it against a bare electric light bulb. The sections were numbered and sent back East.

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ONE director was once offered the facilities of a guava ranch for shooting. He planned his script and carted out his company and their props. It was only upon arrival that he discovered that the guava was a tropical fruit. He had planned a big roundup scene: herding the guavas, driving them to the corral.

A fate of horror shadows the heroine in a scene from a Fox comedy, The Cloud Puncher.