



Episode 6, 2006: Silent Film Reel, Butte, Montana

Gwen Wright: Our next story examines a fragment of film that may be a missing piece of American movie history. In a French cafe in 1895, Auguste and Louis Lumiere launched a worldwide cultural revolution. They were the first to project a motion picture for a paying public. In the next 30 years, American filmmakers will produce tens of thousands of films -- short, simple, and silent -- that capture the nation's imagination and eventually sell a vision of America to a worldwide audience. Today, the vast majority of those early films have vanished, and many of the silent era's beloved actors are fading from our memories, unsung heroes of an industry that did not realize the importance of preserving its roots. More than 100 years after the dawn of the movie age, a man in Kentucky has found a piece of film that could open a window on that long-lost era.

John Etchison: We were up in the attic, and I came across this little container that had an old film in it. It's pretty cool that I could have part of history that nobody knew existed until now.

Gwendolyn Wright: I'm Gwendolyn Wright, and I'm heading to Elsmere, Kentucky, to meet John Etchison. Hi, are you John? I'm Gwen, nice to meet you.

John: A few years ago, my grandfather passed away, and so when we were cleaning out the house, there was a box of old films. Looked like it was more of a 35-millimeter than it was a home-movie thing, so I thought, maybe this is the real deal.

Gwen: John tells me that his grandfather was a service-station attendant for most of his life and not involved in the film business in any way. Well, it says something here. It's hard to read. Look like it's....

John: It says *Dangerous Hour with Eddie Polo*, and it says "western."

Gwen: John found out that Eddie Polo was a popular silent film star in the 1920s, but I've never heard of him.

John: He did make a movie named *Dangerous Hour*, but from the research that I was able to do, there aren't any copies that are known to exist.

Gwen: Well, tell me exactly what you'd like for me to find out.

John: Well, I'd like to find out if the film is exactly what the canister says that it is, how it ended up in my grandfather's attic, and is it really the only piece of this film?

Gwen: Could I have a few minutes to look it over?

John: Sure.

Gwen: Thanks. Well, this definitely looks old enough to be nitrate film, which was the most common film stock used in the silent era. I was hoping that there would be credits at the beginning to tell me the name of the film or the actors in it. It's very short, so it's probably a fragment of a larger film. This is almost certainly not the original can for *Dangerous Hour*. And of course, the label could be inaccurate. All I have to go on as written evidence is the title here, so I'll see what I can find about this Eddie Polo. In the early 20th century, the first generation of movie audiences flocked to theaters, captivated by this miracle technology and eager to escape into the fantasy world projected on the silver screen. Eddie Polo was an audience favorite. A circus performer turned stuntman, Polo entered movies in 1914. He was only 5'9" and 175 pounds, but could lift three men simultaneously. Billed as the "Hercules of the Screen," he was the first man to leap with a parachute from the Eiffel Tower. Polo was the favorite movie star of England's Dowager Queen Alexandra. But when sound took over the film industry, Eddie Polo's popularity plummeted. He died a forgotten hero in 1961.

Gwen: I'm looking for a filmography. There it is. Eddie Polo did make a film called *Dangerous Hour* in 1923. It seems there are very few copies of Eddie Polo's films still in existence. I'm heading to the Library of Congress Motion Picture Conservation Center in Dayton, Ohio.

Gwen: Hi, you must be Ken. Ken Weissman is the head of the Conservation Center, where some 100 million feet of film

Get more on History Detectives at: www.pbs.org/historydetectives



Episode 6, 2006: Silent Film Reel, Butte, Montana

from the early history of motion pictures is stored in 98 climate-controlled vaults. This is quite a dramatic space.

Ken Weissman: These are the Library of Congress nitrate motion picture film vaults. Let's take a look here in Vault 26. It's kind of typical of our vaults. With a little bit of surprise at the end. We have in here the original negative of *The Great Train Robbery*.

Gwen: *The Great Train Robbery*, a thrilling fictional of a Butch Cassidy train heist, is considered the first narrative film. For almost a century, it was thought lost and only found in 1986 in a mislabelled film can.

Ken: This is the original camera negative made in 1903. This is truly one of our national treasures.

Gwen: Ken says John's fragment of film could also be a piece of a lost movie, and he tells me there is no known surviving copy of *Dangerous Hour*.

Ken: It is one of the estimated 80 percent to 90 percent of silent films which have disappeared forever, victims of an era when movies were considered disposable and made on nitrate stock, which is flammable and easily decomposes.

Gwen: Okay, we have a 35-millimeter film.

Ken (inspects it): It's definitely a silent-era film. We have severe damage on the edges in some places, and looks like it's pretty fragile in nature.

Gwen: Well, I was hoping we'd be able to project it. Is that possible?

Ken: No, it's not, really, for several reasons. It's bad archival practice to take your master material, your original unknown film in this case, and risk it by putting it through a projector. Secondly, it wouldn't go through a projector the way it is now anyway.

Gwen: Ken tells me that the Library of Congress has a process for gently scanning fragile films frame by frame to obtain a copy that can be played back. But that process could take months, So Ken rewinds the fragment onto a film core in order to examine some frames up close. He is hunting for a special code that Kodak manufactures into its stock, which will tell us the date this print was made.

Ken: Right on the edge, you see the word "Kodak," and then just off to the side of that are two symbols. We have triangle, triangle. Triangle, triangle is 1921. Now, *Dangerous Hour* was made in 1923.

Gwen: So that's a major discrepancy.

Ken: That's correct.

Gwen: There's still a chance that this could be a clip from *Dangerous Hour*. Ken says that older film stock was sometimes reused for silent movie title cards. The title reads "Come over to the office when you get dried out and I'll give these back to you."

Ken: So either it's raining out, or someone's had a little bit too much to drink.

Gwen: Ken takes pictures of individual frames and blows them up.

Ken: It certainly was a drunken cowboy, I think. I think it's obvious from this picture that it's a western. Here we have sheriff or town marshal, and he's a major character.

Gwen: Oh, here he is with his love interest.

Ken: Appears to be so, yes.



Episode 6, 2006: Silent Film Reel, Butte, Montana

Gwen: So this must be Eddie Polo. But Ken's not so sure. Colleagues at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Library had sent him a still photograph from an ad for *Dangerous Hour*.

Ken: This gentleman in the center is, in fact, Eddie Polo.

Gwen: He doesn't look anything like our character, does he?

Ken: No, he doesn't look like him at all, does he?

Gwen: What about the surrounding cast?

Ken: Well, they're different people, and they're even dressed totally differently, and the setting is different.

Gwen: John's going to be disappointed. His film is not what the label suggests. And now I've no idea what film he actually owns.

Ken: I do have some contacts at other archives, some independent historians. I'd be happy to e-mail them, and maybe they can help you out.

Larry Smith: Hi, Gwen. I'm Larry Smith.

Gwen: While Ken's contacting his archive friends, I'm looking for leads on how this film fragment could end up in the attic of John's grandfather. At the historic Victoria Theater in Dayton, which once played silent movies, I have a date with nitrate film expert Larry Smith.

Larry: I don't recognize who the actor is. He's not one of the major western stars, but the western genre was quite popular in the silent days, and there were literally hundreds of movie stars playing cowboys.

Gwen: Larry tells me the western in these frame grabs is an example of early American independent film.

Larry: When the movie industry got started, it was dominated by the powerful New York-based motion picture patents company. Independent filmmakers rebelled and headed out to the West Coast and the Midwest, where the landscape was perfect for filming action-packed westerns.

Gwen: These independent westerns soon came to define the American mystique for audiences at home and abroad. But the independents could not afford to have their films shipped back and stored after a theatrical run. So when audience interest waned or prints broke from wear and tear, local theaters simply threw them away. According to Larry, thousands of early silent films were lost, though pieces of them are now resurfacing 100 years later in basements and attics across the country. But what use could John's grandfather have possibly had for 50 feet of an independent western?

Larry: Fifty feet of film makes me think of toy projectors. Back in those days, they were the first VCR. It was a little projector you could set up in your living room to give a show to your friends and family. Scraps of film like these were often sold out of the backs of magazines, where people could buy a fragment of film and re-create and play like they're having a show in their living room.

Gwen: But John has no record of his grandfather as a movie fan. Larry says the drunken cowboy scene may be another clue.

Larry: In 1919 when Prohibition started, films had scenes of drunkenness in them, but in the early '20s, Hollywood was rocked by scandals and censorship boards came in and took out scenes that were objectionable. This could be a piece of film that was edited out because a censorship board found it offensive.

Gwen: Larry tells me there are many different paths this film could have taken to John's grandfather's attic, all of them

Get more on History Detectives at: www.pbs.org/historydetectives



Episode 6, 2006: Silent Film Reel, Butte, Montana

virtually impossible to prove. I think what we need to find out now is the title of the film. That's the most important part. Ken puts me in touch with Richard Roberts, an independent film collector. Richard studies the frame grabs and makes an exciting discovery. He recognizes the lead actor.

Gwen: Really?

Richard Roberts: Yes, I do.

Gwen: This guy?

Richard: That guy, who is in fact Jack Hoxie.

Gwen: Jack Hoxie. I've never heard of him. I compare Hoxie's picture to the frame grabs. Same cleft chin. It's a match. Richard tells me that both men were stars in numerous westerns. But while Polo's background was in the circus, Jack Hoxie was the real thing, a cowboy who grew up in Idaho and landed in Hollywood with a Wild West show in 1910. By 1919, he was a big name, especially in small towns.

Richard: Greta Garbo and Ernst Lubitsch pictures, Erich von Stroheim, those were popular in the big cities, but, you know, in Lantry, South Dakota, forget it. The cowboys were what were going to be making your big bucks and were really popular with the audience.

Gwen: How many movies did he make all total?

Richard: Oh, tons. They ground them out like sausages in those days, anywhere from five to a dozen a year. He made some -- approximately 130 pictures. But which Jack Hoxie movie is it? We know the date on the film print is 1921. I have some more frame grabs. Take a look at these and see if they help.

Richard: That looks like a sign, says like "Bartley, Bartlett's camp."

Gwen: This looks like the leading lady.

Richard: Yes. Okay, that's -- you know, I think that's an actress by the name of Helen Rosson.

Gwen: But how do you know? You can't see most of her face.

Richard: Well, you can actually. What I can see is this very defined nose. She had a strange, sort of bulb on the end of her nose, which I see here.

Gwen: The memorable nose allows Richard to sniff out a crucial clue.

Richard: You're saying this is what, 1921, right.

Gwen: We know that from the edge codes.

Richard: Let me check some of the books. Let's take a look...

Gwen: What Richard found next would retrieve a chapter in American film industry from oblivion.

Gwen: I've asked John to meet me at the Library of Congress Motion Picture Conservation Center. Unfortunately, the first thing is that the canister was mislabeled. this is not Eddie Polo in *Dangerous Hour*. But I can tell you what film it was.



Episode 6, 2006: Silent Film Reel, Butte, Montana

Flashback

Richard: Let's take a look.

Gwen: Richard discovered that Helen Rosson had only appeared in one film with Jack Hoxie.

Richard: Jack Hoxie, Helen Rosson. The film is *Devil Dog Dawson*. May 1921 release. So far, so good.

Gwen: To confirm, Richard checks another book for a plot synopsis.

Richard: Here's the plot: Hero blows into Bartlett's camp. You've got the year, you got the star, you got the leading lady, and you got the location. *Devil Dog Dawson*. That's our film.

Back to Reveal

Gwen: I tell John that *Devil Dog Dawson* was one of the early American independent films, a low-budget western pot-boiler, probably shot in six to eight days and played in small-town theaters across the country.

Jack: So does it exist anywhere else, a piece of the film?

Gwen: The specialists had known this film existed, but didn't have a piece of it until yours came around. So the bottom line is, John, you've uncovered what truly is a unique piece of American film history.

Jack: That's cool. That's really cool.

Gwen: I explained that there is no way to say for sure how this piece of lost film ended up in his grandfather's attic, but I do have one more surprise. Thanks to the extraordinary technology that the library of congress film archives uses, we're able to see the full 38 seconds of your copy of *Devil Dog Dawson*. Ken, can you turn it on for us? Thanks, Ken.

[Screens film]

Gwen: So do we know much about this movie itself? We know a little bit, that it's taking place in a mining and lumbering camp, and this is his love interest, the young widow. His big ten-gallon hat. So there's your piece of film, and a little piece of American film history. Thirty-eight whole seconds.

ENDS