

History Comes Alive!

~ Tales From the City Archives ~



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*Photos courtesy the
Security Pacific National Bank Collection,
Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection,
and the City of Los Angeles Archives*

I have walked through Union Station many times and have found a production crew or their equipment prepared to make a TV show, a commercial or movie for theatre screens. It is probably fair to say that the entire world has seen Los Angeles at one time or another – even if they weren't aware of it at the time.

There are many stories about production crews closing off residential streets and generally interfering with the locals trying to go about their business. Believe it or not, the same complaints were being made more than a century ago as Los Angeles became the unexpected backdrop to the early motion picture industry. Our focus here is on the City parks used by studios with names like Selig and Keystone and stories to be found in the records of the Board of Park Commissioners stored at the City Archives.

some of the people they worked with. Griffith Park was such a remote area that park rangers patrolled on horseback and had the occasional run-in with a film crew. A letter from the foreman of Griffith Park describes one such encounter.

The Selig Company was using one of the "canons" (canyons) in Griffith Park "just east of Vermont" for a wagon train scene. After the fact, the question was raised by the Griffith Park foreman as to when a film shoot in a sensitive area was too large. His letter to the head of the Parks Department described the scope of not only the crew but the environmental damage as well.

The company consisted of "300 men, 100 horses and 20 wagons. The canon was covered with the ordinary sage and greasewood, but after the horses had milled around in it for about two hours, all the vegetation had ground to dust...I would like to ask if there is any limit to the size of a company as such a large outfit changes the whole appearance

and drained the lake, leaving the lovers trapped in their rowboat in the middle of a very messy landscape. Press reports about amorous couples on park benches resulted in movie plots involving the same benches, with pretty girls, seedy men and comic policemen added to the mix. Echo Park was as much a character to the Sennett brand of chaos as it was a backdrop.

But Echo Park was also a very active piece in the City park system with both the reservoir and the grounds. The facility files that have survived are rich with the day-to-day struggles of running a park of its kind. The working papers – both formal requests and scribbled notes from the park foreman, the boathouse concessionaire and the public – reveal a facility chronically underfunded and technically challenging. They also include correspondence that rounds out the history framed by the commission minutes.

An example would be the Board of Park Commissioners decision to ban all

citizens... and not for the exploitation by any industry."

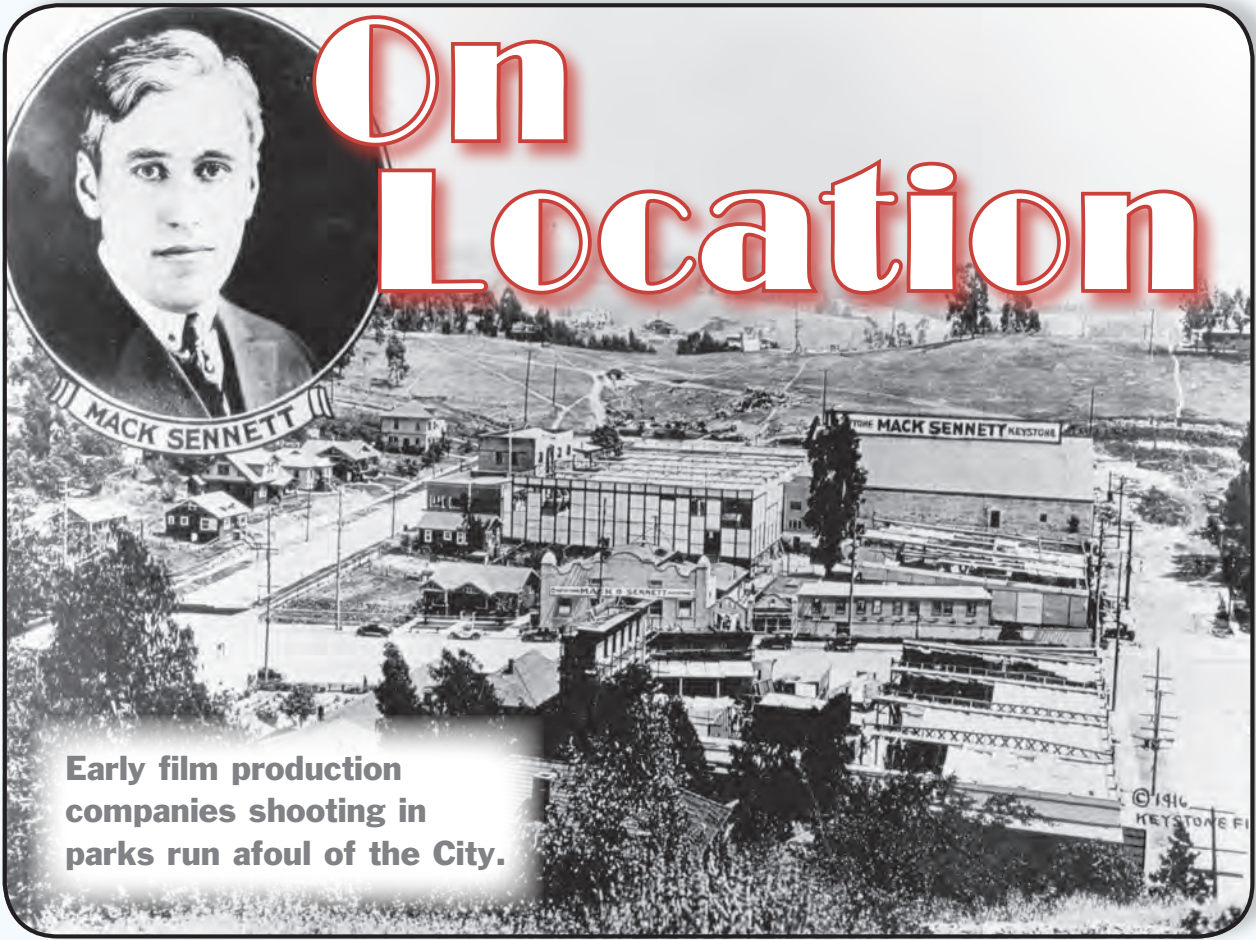
Meanwhile, all the other parks were still open for business, so Keystone and the other studios increased shooting at Hollenbeck Park and other locations, thereby preserving them on film. The files for Hollenbeck have few complaints although some unnamed studio once asked to drive a car off the bridge into the lake. The request was denied.

By 1920, the film community as a whole had become part of the City establishment and were behaving more responsibly. Several companies had donated exotic animals including camels to the Griffith Park Zoo – the ancestor of the current zoo we know today – in exchange for the ability to rent them for location shoots. The industry was growing up at the same time the City was becoming world famous and more populous. The chaos of early moviemaking had given way to a structured and formal process with clear sets of rules that mostly satisfied the local government and citizens although exceptions have continued ever since.

Part of the new structure was an improved set of permit and rule schedules that went into effect in July 1921. A sliding scale, beginning at \$5 per day for one actor up to \$35 for 25 actors or more, assigned a value to using City property. The same livestock that scarred the canyon in Griffith Park in 1914 now \$1 per head per day. A new \$250 monthly permit allowed studios belonging to a newly formed organization that would become the Motion Picture Producers Association (MPPA) to shoot in almost any City park with one exception.

But finally, the ban on Echo Park was lifted in November 1921. A letter to the park foreman stated that the Board "rescinded the order... which closed Echo Park to all motion picture companies and that, in the future, this park be open for motion picture work." But Mack Sennett had given up the Keystone brand that had used Echo Park in the first years of his operation. He and others would continue to use parks and City streets in their movies, but they would reflect a different city than the one so attractive to many of the pioneers and their audiences. But we can still enjoy them, if only in black and white.

Some History Comes Alive! columns can be heard on 89.3-KPCC's Off-Ramp, online at www.kpcc.org/offramp/



Early film production companies shooting in parks run afoul of the City.

Panoramic view of the Mack Sennett's Keystone Studios, located on Allesandro in Edendale, now part of Echo Park. Mack Sennett (1880-1960), whose photo has been placed in the upper left corner of the image, founded the Keystone Studios in Edendale.

One of the greatest gifts of the early films is they capture a Los Angeles that no longer exists. Movies were shot in the downtown area or some outdoor event where buildings, streetcars and other landmarks disappeared decades ago. Beach scenes and westerns shot in remote places including Griffith Park or the Cahuenga Pass give us a glimpse of what earlier generations, coming to Los Angeles, saw for themselves.

Everyone filmed in real places all over Southern California – often without warning or permission from the local government. Permits were required to shoot in Los Angeles and cost \$1 a month in the 1910s. The 1916 annual budget report of the Parks Department listed revenue of \$216 from motion picture permits. By 1920, the permit revenue was \$715 and by 1926 the revenue figure had jumped to \$4,800.

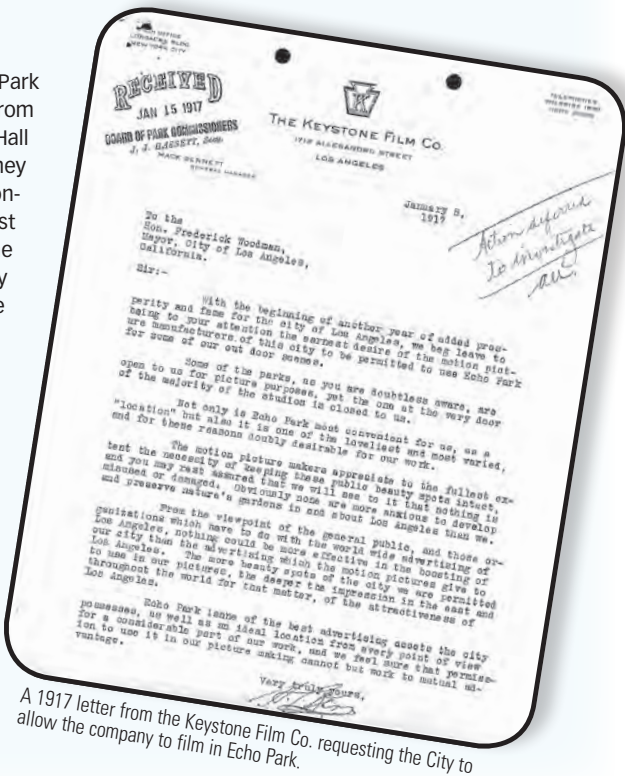
Then, as now, there were abuses of the locations by the moviemakers or

of a place in a few hours." The Park Commissioners decided to limit the livestock to no more than 25 head and the number of persons to be limited at the discretion of the foreman.

There were more urbane locations popular with the movie people that also challenged the park system. The Keystone Studio was at 1712 Allesandro St. in the Edendale section of Los Angeles. Actor-director Mack Sennett's crew took full advantage of the variety of scenery throughout Los Angeles, be it a downtown parade or the amusement parks in Venice, where they set up shop in 1912. One of their favorite and most convenient locations was about a mile from the studio: Echo Park.

This park inspired some of the slapstick Keystone was known for. When the City drained the lake in the summer of 1913 for improvements, a film called *A Muddy Romance* included a scene where a jilted suitor opened a valve

film companies from Echo Park in early 1914. A response from the commission to a City Hall inquiry clearly stated who they held accountable for the conditions in the park: "Almost all the damage was done by the Keystone Comedy company and because we endeavor to treat all motion picture companies alike, the order was made to exclude all companies from the park" The letter goes on, accusing the moviemakers of "being disposed to disregard all rules and regulations: They take all kinds of liberties and show no regard whatever for the fact that the parks are for the benefit and enjoyment of the



A 1917 letter from the Keystone Film Co. requesting the City to allow the company to film in Echo Park.