



Silent Movies and the Kodascope Libraries

by David Pierce

Before you could go to the corner convenience store to rent a Hitchcock classic, before you could send away for your very own foggy 8mm print of a silent favorite like *The Lost World*, all was not entirely a desert for an aspiring film hobbyist.

Why should Hollywood ever have paid the least attention to a grubby movie enthusiast and the loud grinding of his "silent" projector? Probably because producers have always tried to wring the last dollar out of their library of films; all that's changed are the titles and the delivery system.

Now, it's video cassettes; 50 years ago, it was the Kodascope library. These days a Kodascope is

virtually a generic term for an old, possibly amber or multi-tinted, 16mm original print of a silent film.

But Kodascopes were much more than that. They played an important part in establishing 16mm, and introduced an entire generation to silent movies. Starting in 1925, these "Kodascopes" could be rented from local camera stores or Eastman Kodak's own regional offices.

The Kodascope Libraries defined and dominated the early non-theatrical industry, and represented the cornerstone of a coordinated plan to make 16mm the standard for home and educational movies.

Kodascope Libraries were, as film historian

David Shepard has noted, "the first 16mm non-theatrical film exchange system," offering movies to homes, schools and institutions. Kodascope used their own regional exchanges, the Eastman Kodak Stores, and subdistributors such as camera stores to offer licensed prints for rental and occasionally for purchase. Kodascope claimed in their advertisements that their library had more subjects than were "contained in all other libraries combined."

Because it started in the 1920s as a library of silent films before there were projectors equipped for sound, the Kodascope Libraries helped keep silent films alive in the thirties and early forties. In many cases Kodascope prints (or copies made from them) represent all that survives on an important (or not so important) silent film.

There had been many attempts to establish a smaller than 35mm gauge for home and educational use. A safety film, 28mm wide, was introduced in France in 1912 by Pathé Freres. The system was then introduced in England and in America by Willard Cook's Pathéscope of America, which called it the "safety standard."

The goals of 28mm were two-fold: establishment of a film library for educational purposes, and the use of non-flammable film. It was hoped that the exclusive use of non-flammable film would end the serious fire hazard presented by the lack of fire-proof booths and trained operators in many schools and churches. Also, producers could be sure that their films would not end up in commercial theaters.

Although the 1921 28mm catalog of the United Safety Film Library claimed that "practically all the film producing companies give us permission to reproduce from their original negatives new prints for use in our libraries," that was far from the case. The films were primarily from defunct production companies such as Thanhouser, Essanay, Biograph and Triangle, in addition to a large number of scenics and industrials of limited interest.

Despite the smaller size, the use of more expensive non-flammable film stock meant that they cost more to print than the same subjects in 35mm. A five reel feature such as *His Picture in the Papers* (1916) with Douglas Fairbanks, took up ten 28mm reels and rented for \$7.20 per night.

In 1922 Eastman Kodak announced the 16mm process for home and amateur use. The system used a reversal film with a finer grain structure than 35mm, eliminating the need for a negative, and a further savings was the use of film with an image size one-sixth that of 35mm. Most importantly, the system used safety film stock, gaining important exemptions from fire laws and underwriting codes that governed the flammable 35mm nitrate film used in commercial theaters.

Eastman Kodak's principal competitor in the camera and projector business, Bell & Howell, also embraced 16mm and announced its 16mm camera and projector in May, 1924. Kodak's competitor in the film

stock business, DuPont, was already in business, supporting the European 9.5mm standard.

What Kodak could offer was the possibility of reasonably affordable home movies, a rental library of entertainment and educational titles, and a standard film stock, small enough to offer real cost savings over 35mm, while large enough to offer a good quality image on a large screen, and an odd size to ensure that 35mm nitrate film was unlikely to be slit or otherwise diverted to this use.

Kodak had supported the 28mm standard by making 28mm safety film stock available, so to build on the limited success of that gauge, and ensure that 16mm became the new safety standard, they encouraged camera and projector makers to enter into competition with them, and hired Willard Cook of Pathéscope to start Kodascope Libraries, Inc., a new division of the Eastman Kodak Company.

The titles were handled by Kodascope library exchanges, which were established initially in six US cities and Toronto. By 1930 the catalogs were boasting about 15 US, four Canadian and 21 overseas locations for the rental and sale of films. Not all titles were available to each Kodascope exchange. For example, Minneapolis had the half of the library with odd control numbers, while Kansas City had only the even numbered subjects. Of course, camera stores licensed only the titles they wanted.

In January, 1927, Bell & Howell entered the rental market by offering 16mm prints for sale as part of the Filmo Library to complement their Filmo Automatic Cine-Camera and Cine-Projector. By August



Opposite page: *The battling dinosaurs of First National's 1925 The Lost World* were popular in tinted Kodascope prints. They were built by Marcel Delgado and animated by Willis O'Brien. Left: Max and Dave Fleischer's Betty Boop was the sexiest item in the Kodascope Library.



Famed as an historical spectacle, Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927) was also praised for touching scenes such as the little blind girl and her brother.

there were ten libraries servicing the home amateur market.

In October, Hollywood entered the industry as Kodascope announced the acquisition of features from Paramount, the largest studio. Soon afterwards Pathé announced the release of its titles to be called Pathégrams, while Universal formed the Show-at-Home Movie Library. All of them promised a delay between the theatrical and non-theatrical release. By April, 1928, there were 22 different rental libraries, a tremendous increase from only the Kodascope Libraries just over a year earlier.

At this time there was some uncertainty in the market as some libraries offered films for rental only, while others were established only for outright sale. With the increased number of titles, large libraries franchised local dealers to carry their films, and at the retail level the market became primarily a rental one.

Films were available in innumerable local camera shops that would license prints from Kodak, and then rent them out. Kodascope even prepared a booklet, *How the Kodascope Library Brought Prosperity to Our Store*, to explain to prospective dealers how they could make money operating their own film rental libraries. By 1934 Kodascope had over 20,000 reels in active use by branch libraries and dealer-distributors in 40 US cities.

A look at an undated Show-At-Home contract from the 1920s reveals that stores could license "productions of Universal Pictures Corporation and high-class productions of other leading producers" for \$50 per reel per year, and \$25 per reel for each additional copy of the same film.

Carrying a selection of these films could help a camera store attract customers. While all the necessary equipment could be rented, many camera stores tried to offer a full service. In New York, Willoughby's

advertised, "Complete show service is available. We will furnish the operator, machine, films and screen for showing anywhere within 50 miles of New York City."

The rental of films was more reasonable than purchasing them, but still costly. A five reel feature like *The Lost World* would require \$8.75 for one day's rental, while a Chaplin two-reeler would cost \$3.00.

The Kodsascope library included feature films, theatrical shorts and educational shorts. The library was continually updated. An average month would see the addition of two or three shorts, or a feature and a short. For example, for one month in 1932, an advertisement in *Movie Makers* announced Kodsascope's release of the DeMille studio's *Fighting Eagle* (1927) with Rod La Rocque (edited from eight reels to five), Harry Langdon in the Mack Sennett three-reel comedy *Soldier Man* (1926), and Harold Lloyd in *Never Weaken* (1921) trimmed from three reels to two.

For the first catalog in 1925, the films ranged from Felix the Cat and Out-of-the-Inkwell cartoons to eleven Warner Bros. features including the John Barrymore feature *Beau Brummel* (1924). However the remainder of the features, dating as far back as 1914, were from defunct production companies such as World or Selznick or from independent producers such as C.B.C. Films and Irving Lesser. As the library became more established, and it became evident that the theatrical business was not affected, the majors signed on and Paramount, First National, Pathé and Fox contributed titles.

The first Kodsascope catalog noted: "Kodascope Library reels are not for sale at any price." By the next catalog Kodak had softened that stand and the second edition catalog notes that "subjects may be purchased for \$50.00 from the parent library in New York only." Also, periodically, used prints were advertised and sold at a price of \$5 to \$10 per reel.

In a December, 1932 letter to a prospective customer referred by a mutual friend, the General Manager of the Kodsascope operation wrote of their policy on selling films and their carefree attitude towards the completeness of their prints:

"We are constantly retiring films from active rental use... Occasionally a subject has mutilated perforations while it is practically new, and has to be withdrawn on that account. Usually, however, the subjects have had long and extensive use... With proper care and a little judicious repairing, the used prints are good for scores of future projections. Of course some short sections may have been eliminated, but when you realize that the average theatrical production was cut down from probably double its final length, you will realize that editing is frequently more than desirable!"

One of the outstanding features of the library was the diversity of titles. From 1925 to 1939, seven catalogs were issued, and over the years a total of 770 different films were made available. The wide variety of shorts included 74 split reel subjects from the Bray studios, 11 Charlie Chaplin films made for Essanay and

the 12 that he made for Mutual, 28 Max Fleischer Out-of-the-Inkwell cartoons, 30 Post travelogues, 31 one- and two-reel Mack Sennett comedies, 38 Hal Roach comedies, 32 Felix the Cat cartoons and 10 Eastman Classroom Films.

The features were also from varied sources. Films from major companies included eight features from the DeMille studios, including *The Yankee Clipper* and *The King of Kings*, the latter also available with sound and effects; three from the Pathé studio; six First National features including *The Lost World*; one feature from Fox; 18 Warner Bros. features, which included five starring Rin-Tin-Tin; and the crown jewels of the collection, 19 features from Paramount, including *The Covered Wagon* (1923) and *Are Parents People?* (1925).

Films from minor studios and independents included *The New School Teacher* with "Chic" Sale from C.C. Burr; *Flesh and Blood* with Lon Chaney from Irving Cummings; five W.W. Hodkinson features, the best of which was the Will Rogers version of *The Headless Horseman*, six from Sol Lesser's Principal Pictures, including *Captain January* with Baby Peggy and Hobart Bosworth, and five features from C.B.C. Films.

There were 12 films from the companies that eventually became RKO Radio Pictures, with five titles from R.C. (Robertson-Cole) Pictures including the 1920 *Kismet*, and seven F.B.O. features, including *Thundering Hoofs* with Fred Thomson.

Films from long-gone companies included nine Lewis J. Selznick titles, including *The Forbidden City* (1918) with Norma Talmadge; three Triangle titles, including William S. Hart's *The Return of Draw Egan* (1916); and ten films from World, including Maurice Tourneur's *The Wishing Ring* (1914).

While Kodascope never succeeded in getting titles from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer or the independent producers at United Artists, they were successful in making license agreements with the other major companies. Most of the major companies did not reissue their films, so a Kodascope release presented no conflict, while the minor companies considered any revenue to be welcome.

For all but the most desirable titles, Kodascope's license fees were not impressive. In 1924, Kodascope offered George Kleine \$75 per title for two of his one-reel shorts, *Caring for Birds in Winter* and *Getting Acquainted With Bees*. Those producers with titles more in demand undoubtedly did better.

Probably the best deal was struck by the then number one studio in Hollywood, Paramount. The first Kodascope contract with Paramount, dated June 15, 1927, allowed Kodascope to pick titles from the Paramount inventory. While Kodascope could choose virtually any titles they wanted, the suggested titles were in five groups – Raymond Griffith, Gloria Swanson, Adolphe Menjou, Pola Negri and miscellaneous.

The minimum license fee was \$2000 per title, with most costing \$2500. The most expensive films were from the miscellaneous category, with *The Covered Wagon* (1923) being licensed for \$3000 and the



Left: Frames from *The Covered Wagon* (1925), directed by James Cruze and photographed by Karl Brown, can only suggest the pictorial beauty of this Kodascope perennial.

tremendously popular and more recent Wallace Beery/Raymond Hatton comedy *Behind The Front* (1926) for \$5000. In exchange for an exclusive agreement for the use of these titles, Kodascope agreed to a \$50,000 minimum license fee. While the contract is surprisingly vague, this appears to have been a one- or two-year renewable license.

While Kodascope was concentrating on building a rental library, some of its competitors were concentrating on direct sales of rental libraries and individuals. Although a percentage of sales might seem more lucrative than a flat payment, producers found that without Eastman Kodak's strong distribution system they were not making much money at all.

In the late twenties, the dormant Thomas H. Ince Corporation licensed six features to the Bell & Howell libraries. They were *The Busher* (1919) with Charles Ray and Colleen Moore, *Square Deal Sanderson*



Rin Tin Tin, on location for *The Night Cry* (1926), wasn't just another pretty dog.

(1919) with William S. Hart, *The Cup of Life* (1921) with Hobart Bosworth, *Soul of the Beast* (1923) with Madge Bellamy, *Scars of Jealousy* (1923) with Frank Keenan, and *The Marriage Cheat* (1924) with Adolphe Menjou. While B&H was selling prints of the features for up to \$200 each, at a 50% royalty (after deducting the costs of the dupe negatives) the total payments to the owners for the four years through 1933 still amounted to less than \$2,500.

The Ince royalties from Hollywood Film Enterprises were an even more modest \$2 per reel sold. HFE was offering prints of Ince features, including *Lorna Doone* (1922), *Barbara Frietchie* (1924), and *The Sea Lion* (1921). 1935 saw total sales of seven prints, for a royalty of \$99.00. In a letter accompanying that year's annual statement, they apologized for the small amount:

"While the amount of royalties paid is not large as compared with the 35mm earnings it represents pure profit without expense to you and profit that in no way interferes with the 35mm use of the pictures. The 16mm field is one that is expanding rapidly, all 16mm film libraries are making heavy investments in pictures and we anticipate even larger business this coming year than we have had this past year.

Once a title was selected, Kodascope would borrow the original negative and prepare a lavender positive to be professionally shortened. This interpositive would be the source of a 35mm dupe negative to be used for printing. The main titles would be shortened, and most features were cut to five reels. There were notable exceptions: the ten reel specials *Beau Brummel* and *The Covered Wagon* were cut to seven and six, respectively, and *Grass* from seven to four. Most of the films would now fit on five 400' reels, running just under an hour.

The editing was often invisible and the films were cut for time, not content. Films with racy scenes

simply weren't chosen. Fearful that prospective renters might be scared off, the description of the Raymond Griffith comedy *The Night Club* (1925) noted, "Title misleading. Nothing to do with wild night life in a big city." The sole exception to this policy was a two reel excerpt from Raoul Walsh's *The Wanderer*, a feature based on the story of the prodigal son. As the catalog noted, "this excerpt was prepared especially for showing at club meetings, lodges and smokers." The film was also available in a tamer, five reel feature version.

The Kodascope prints were reduction printed from the 35mm nitrate dupe negatives, with no 16mm internegative used. As a result, the prints were unusually clear and sharp with rich contrast and are renowned for a quality seldom found today.

The only method for better quality prints would be to print directly from the 35mm nitrate original negative to 16mm, saving the cost of the dupe negative. This was the method used by Hollywood Film Enterprises. It was acceptable when only a small number of prints would be needed, but owners ran the risk of wearing out the negative and having no protection material.

What happened to all those Kodascope prints? According to James Card, former director of the department of film at the George Eastman House Museum of Photography in Rochester, New York, when Eastman Kodak closed the Kodascope Libraries Division, all of the prints were recalled and sent to Rochester for silver reclamation. Card acquired the remaining 35mm negatives for Eastman House and many of them were preserved (in their cut versions) in 35mm.

From the 1930s through the 1950s, with the exception of titles from the Museum of Modern Art Circulating Film Program, most of the silent films available for rental were home library prints originally distributed by the Kodascope Libraries and made available in the 1920s and early 1930s.

The availability of these titles through the 16mm market kept silents circulating during a time of little critical or commercial interest. If silent films received little attention outside of The Museum of Modern Art, it was probably because most of the titles that could be rented did not represent the silent film at its artistic peak, but rather the commercial, run-of-the-mill program picture.

The haphazard assortment of films helped define many latter-day critical reputations of the stars of the period. Colleen Moore was tremendously popular in the twenties, yet, along with her World War I epic *Lilac Time*, her reputation rests entirely on her most available films, the Kodascope versions of *Orchids and Ermine* and *Ella Cinders*.

For that, and for much else besides, we can thank the Kodascope Libraries for sustaining some level of interest in silent films before the comparative renaissance which they enjoy today. △

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