

KATY JEAN: Seen But Not Heard: The Silent Era of Film in Nova Scotia

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Actress Theda Bara at the height of her popularity. Contributed

In 1913, the first Canadian film was produced and captured in Nova Scotia.

The silent film *Evangeline*, based on the poem of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, was also a first for the Halifax-based Canadian Bioscope Company. The Canadian Bioscope Company was located at the very end of Barrington Street (the former Pleasant Street) with its own soundstage.

It is now home to the Halifax Chinese Christian Church.

The production company, along with directors, actors and crew, aspired for *Evangeline*'s authenticity.

Scenes were filmed on location on a leatherbound 35mm camera. When completed there was over 5,000 feet of film with moving images of Grand Pre all the way to Dartmouth. Port Royal paired with scenes in Preston. And many more places in between until they carried on to other locations in Quebec.

God knows who lugged that gear. Lord granted them a blessing for not allowing them to live to see an iPhone.



One of the surviving stills from 1914 *Evangeline*. The actors are sitting near the current Tennis courts of Chocolate Lake. - Nova Scotia Archives

Evangeline was a critical success. Reviews lauded the cinematographer for capturing such beauty. The actors stirred emotion. The production company made their \$30,000 budget back (about a million today.)

And then the film entirely disappeared. Never to be watched again. Hardly to be watched at all, really, as it disappeared within a few years of its 1914 release.

The original *Evangeline* is a lost film.

Silent film director Raoul Walsh would film an adaptation of a less authentic and California-produced *Evangeline* in 1919.

Walsh would pull his wife of three years, Miriam Cooper, out of the private life she longed for to star in *Evangeline*.

Walsh and Cooper had met four years earlier on a film set.

Miriam Cooper was a rising star. She had a significant role. Walsh had a cameo and assisted in directing the film that has been described as "the most reprehensibly racist film in Hollywood history."

Birth of a Nation, based on the play *The Clansmen* and book by Thomas Dixon Jr., was met with shock at its debut in 1915.

Racist stereotypes and insulting portrayals of Black characters with white-washed inaccuracies about the American civil war sparked riots immediately after premiere screenings.

The film glorified the Klu Klux Klan and is credited for the respawning of white supremacist hate organizations.

Hooded men galloping on horses to save the damsel in distress. Liberty given to the absolutely non-threatened nor oppressed white people in the film. The only mercy of the entire epic is its silence. Though some title cards describe dialogue, the imagery is adequately offensive.

Cooper was ill when the film debuted and saw it later independently. She stated it was racist. And carried on with her life.

After the backlash of the film, which notably was the first film ever played in the White House and the most commercially successful silent film in history, director Griffith unapologetically defended his cinematic creation.

But opinion was a risk to his money. And he wanted to win back the audience of morals.

Griffith made a second film called Intolerance in 1916. He would use nearly the exact same cast, including the same star, Lillian Gish, a known friend of Sidney Oland of Nova Scotia's Oland Brewery, Miriam Cooper and Barrington, Nova Scotia's Josephine Crowell, who played Cooper's mother.

Cooper's acting began to slow after Intolerance, a title aimed at the audience, as she yearned for the aforementioned private life.



Miriam Cooper and her son Jack, who was Halifax-born and a survivor of the Halifax Explosion. - Contributed

In 1919 Walsh and Cooper adopted a five-year-old boy. The little boy Jack was living in a care home in New York. Jack had been the only one of his family members to survive the Halifax Explosion. He had been there nearly two years.

It's a wonder why they wouldn't return to their son's homeland and the inspiration behind the story.

Something Cooper's rival Theda Bera thought out loud.

Theda Bera was an established icon of the silent era. Her expressive eyes and strategically worn and placed outfits wowed all who were already new to the moving picture. Most known as "the Vamp" for her role as a vampire in 1915 she preferred to play strong female roles.

She had spent her youth and most all of her summers in Clementsport, Annapolis County at her parent's vacation home.

It is a wonder if she ever spoke with fellow silent film star Frederick Vroom. He too was from Clementsport. But perhaps not of equal success.

In 1921 Theda Bara married film director Charles Brabin.

Bara and Brabin had a two-year honeymoon which was kicked off at the Digby Pines and celebrated at her parent's summer home. Their own vacation estate was down the coast in Harbourville, which included four farms (that they did not work on) and vast lumber (that they did not cut down) was the home base for their travels.

While on the honeymoon Brabin asked Bara if they should make a new Evangeline. They were already there and enjoyed their time in Nova Scotia. And any opportunity for Bara to show up Miriam Cooper as well as Fox, her former company, seemed like a plan.

The couple was tossing the idea around when Brabin was called to direct the epic film Ben-Hur.

He was replaced shortly after. The idea of a Bara Evangeline dissipated. Along with Bara's desire to film much more.

By the early 1920's both ladies of the original silent era faded like their films.

Cooper turned chaotic and ran away to New York with Jack and her other adopted son. She divorced Walsh, then gave Walsh the kids, then sued Walsh about the kids, who sued her and then the children sued her and never spoke to her again. She also wrote a play.

Bara took her bow. Her father died in Clementsport in 1935. The couple began selling off their property in the 1940s as they entered their forties as well. Which is likely the equivalent of time and a half with exposure to a variety of untested cosmetics, asbestos sets and lead paint.

One more Evangeline was made during the silent era in 1929. It starred Dolores del Río, wife of Orson Welles. It was filmed in California and Minnesota.