

BLACK DIAMOND COMEDIES

United States Motion Picture Company

WHEN?
1912-1920

WHERE? Forty Fort
and Wilkes-Barre, PA



EVENT
Black Diamond comedy films

VOCABULARY
Epicenter
Nitrate film

Who doesn't like to laugh?

At the turn of the 20th century, invention patents were soaring. One of those industries that was experiencing new ideas coupled with carefree ambition was film. All the people involved in putting a film on screen—screenwriters exploring their craft, cameramen using the latest technology of the day, investors risking thousands and thousands of dollars, actors and actresses were eagerly jumping into this evolving medium. The fledgling industry was really starting to sprout in New York City and neighboring New Jersey. It wasn't long, however, until costs of production soared. Equipment and salaries quickly ate into any profits. Owners looked for a new place where the scenery would be a wonderful backdrop to their ideas, and labor and set construction costs could be lowered. They found it in Wyoming Valley.

For a while anyway, Forty Fort became the epicenter of film. The little town outside of Wilkes-Barre was more used to the humming of daily life in the mines and silk mills more than the whirring of the camera. Yet here is where Paramount decided to take a chance to build a comedy portfolio. The new production company created in 1912 made a studio near the corner of Wyoming Avenue and Slocum Street in Forty Fort though the headquarters were in Wilkes-Barre. James O. Walsh was the main investor and head of the enterprise.

Daniel L. Hart, future mayor of Wilkes-Barre, and Fred Hermann the manager of the Savoy Theater on Public Square lobbied to get the company to locate in the area (Times Leader, Jones). Under the leadership of the U.S. Motion Picture Corporation (USMPC) who had a contract with Paramount, the Black Diamond Comedies were born in 1914. The comedy company took its name from the "black diamond" anthracite coal mined in the Wyoming Valley. The use of trick photography such as throwing someone out a window was used by director Billy Quirk to the delight of the audiences. The series was quite popular according to the trade magazine Picture Play's "Screen Gossip" column—"At last Paramount has added some jolly good comedies to its program" (Film).

The Savoy Theater was chosen for the world premiere of Daniel L. Hart's comedy, *The Wish Bone*, on March 1, 1916. The audience enthusiastically responded to the humorous storyline and recognizable icons of the community (Times Leader, Jones). The film includes a number of



Carl Dally

familiar places in Wilkes-Barre including a home on River Street, the city's Public Square, and the Sterling Hotel. One other feature reel about two submariners adrift at sea used the Susquehanna River and Harvey's Lake as their stage backdrop (Times Leader, Jones). The company produced dozens of short, silent films. Each lasted about 15 minutes and were shown before feature movies produced by Paramount. Another early comedy shown to a public audience, *Nearly A Deserter*, was ready by October 1916 (Times-Tribune).

About every two weeks, a one-reel film of high-spirited playful antics was made. Though spoken dialogue wouldn't be heard until 1927 with *The Jazz Singer*, these actors relied on body movements—exaggerated facial expressions and expressive hand motions to tell their story with help from an occasional written cue card read by the viewing audience. Local aspiring



Leatrice Joy

talent was used though most were not given credit for their roles. A few, however, like Carl Dally was one who was recognized along with Ruth Elder and Julien Reed (Times Leader, Jones).

Actress Leatrice Joy from New Orleans was usually the star of the silent comedy made for Black Diamond. She was the lead in *Her Fractured Voice* (1917) which has a scene with the fountain in Public Square in the background. *His Neglected Wife*, written by Rex Taylor, has scenes in it that were filmed in the Hotel Sterling which stood at the corner of River and Market Streets. That film series was produced by USMPC under the title *Rainbow Comedies*.

According to Mokarsky, another film, *Susie Slips One Over*, was probably shot at Hillside Farms in Shavertown, Pa. In his Times Leader article, Charles Jones points out that Joy, who appeared in several Mary Pickford movies, was a “beloved figure in the local community, even hosting a lawn party for the neighborhood children studio in Forty Fort” (Times Leader, Jones).

Joy went on to Hollywood to become a successful actress (Times-tribune). One of her more famous film appearances was in the 1923 version of *The Ten Commandments* under the direction of the legendary Cecil B. DeMille. With her bobbed hairstyle and portrayal of strong, independent women, she successfully made the transition from silent films to sound. She was honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame (Mocarsky Wordpress). She died on May 13, 1985 in Riverdale, New York.



Cold weather, snow and ice during the winter months forced USMPC to film in Jacksonville where the weather was more cooperative (Times Leader, Jones). Nonetheless, a number of the 27 Black Diamond Comedy films made on flammable nitrate have been lost or deteriorated. Some of those that have survived have been found in places as far away as New Zealand. Others are preserved in places like the San Francisco Prelinger Archives according to Ms. Noreen O'Connor. She has spent years in research about the comedy company with her King's College undergraduate English classes.

USMPC's contract with Paramount ended in 1917 as Paramount began producing two-reel comedies with the famous comedian Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle. When the contract was lost so was the name "Black Diamond Comedies." However, USMPC continued to produce films until 1919 under "Rainbow Comedies." By 1920, the small company who had contributed so much to

the early cinema industry began to merge into yesteryear as the larger corporations began to make their own productions.

Brief as it was, the film industry with a local flavor was mixed into the culture allowing those who toiled in the grime of coal above and below the surface to enjoy the light of humor if only for a reel or two.

ONLINE RESOURCES

[Black Diamond Comedies WordPress](#)

[Film Preservation USMPC](#)

[Times Leader, Jones. Black Diamond Comedies](#)

[Times Tribune Black Diamond Comedy](#)