

# LYMAN HOWE PIONEER FILMMAKER

High Class Moving Pictures

WHEN?  
1856-1923

## VOCABULARY

Animotoscope  
celluloid  
kinetoscope  
proto-film



EVENT  
Early filmmaker

WHERE?  
Wilkes-Barre, PA

Everyone has heard of Hollywood---the famous people, blockbuster films, and the large fortunes made by the big studios. Few of us who live in the Wyoming Valley may know that at one time Forty Fort was a hub of filmmaking and the start for Hollywood idols! Of course, that was in the early 1900s. Nonetheless, many silent -picture studios were experiencing high costs working in New Jersey and New York. They found the Wyoming Valley much more budget friendly with space to build their sets, and the audiences were appreciative. Eventually, however, the weather in California would woo those studios to Hollywood.

In the midst of this move to northeast Pennsylvania was one of the very first filmmakers--an innovative pioneer, Lyman Howe. Born in Wilkes-Barre in 1856 to Nathan and Margaret Howe, he attended the local school at the Wyoming Academy. After a few years working at various jobs, his journey into the world of traveling showmen began when he was 27 years old (historical marker). One of his first shows involved traveling with a working model of a coal mine. Towns in Pennsylvania and nearby states gathered 'round the 3,000 pound model as Howe illustrated how it worked (Times Leader). It was a summer job; in the winter he turned to painting. Within a few years he moved on to lighter fare.



He recognized that not all singers and performers could reach all audiences, so when he purchased a phonograph in 1890, he used that as a portable concert venue. With a tin bell shaped horn to broadcast the sound, he drew audiences to his circus-like ringleader showmanship as he honed his craft. Yet his ambition was to move into the use of pictures for audiences. This was before celluloid film had been invented and the projectors that used it. The early machines were dubbed proto-film projectors. They projected single images in such a way as to create the illusion of a moving picture. One such machine was the kinetoscope developed by Thomas Edison, but that allowed only one person at a time to view the show.



Howe failed in his attempts to buy a machine so he invented his own: the animotoscope which had a second reel so it could show longer films (Times-Leader). In 1896, his hometown was the first stop where he used the phonograph coupled with film. This innovative style was among the very first to create sound effects with film. Occasionally he also blended live music and actors

with pictures as well as his own narration during the show. This kind of experience immersed the audience within the show and proved to be immensely popular. He called his shows “High Class” to separate himself from other showmen like P.T. Barnum and the Warner Brothers (historical marker).

In 1901, Howe began making his own movies featuring newsreels and other topics of interest shown to small towns that might never have known it otherwise. Howe continually honed his craft and in August 1905, filmed President Theodore Roosevelt’s visit to Wilkes-Barre as the borough celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary.



For several years Howe worked in small towns and cities like Wilkes-Barre. He hired other traveling showmen—lecturers and entertainers—until he had six shows moving out of the headquarters in Wilkes-Barre. He expanded his shows to early movie theaters called nickleodeons that drew large audiences. He was one of the first to take shots from an airplane which he did over Kirby Park in 1911 (Times Leader).

A cartoon series titled *Hodge Podge* were part of Howe’s films that were exhibited from 1922-1929. He also made films about the building of the Panama Canal, the wedding of Alfonso XIII of Spain and various cultures around the world (Times Leader). While he made many films—most of which are lost--the link for one of his most famous films *Down on the Farm* is listed below. One other that has been found and restored is *Lyman Howe’s Famous Ride on a Runaway Train* (Times Leader).

Howe died in 1923 and is buried in the Oak Lawn Cemetery and Mausoleum in Hanover Township.

#### ONLINE RESOURCES

[Howe Historical Marker](#)

[Down on the Farm](#)

[TIMES LEADER "HOWE"](#)

#### PRINT RESOURCES

Musser, Charles and Carol Nelson. *High Class Moving Pictures: Lyman Howe and the Forgotten Era of Travel Exhibition, 1880-1920*.

Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1991.