Getting a Close-Up of the Silent-Film Era

By EVE M. KAHN

FROM the days of Thomas Edison, the New York area has been a big part of the film industry, and now modern technology is turning some of the strip malls and storage sheds of New Jersey and New York into silent-movie shrines. With help from the Web, fans of those films can hike along parking lots, weedy streambeds and gritty alleys where early screen

Theda Bara, left, filmed in “Carmen” in about 1915 in Fort Lee, N.J., vamping on a rock still visible at an apartment complex on Main Street.

ANOTHER MOVIE ROAD TRIP


actors posed as American Indians, Confederate soldiers, Soviet spies, Dickens characters and escaped convicts.

This summer, expert local historians and preservationists drove me around to look at a few that appear in recently rediscovered film clips. Now I can actually picture Theda Bara beguiling suitors on rock outcroppings in Fort Lee, N.J., or Lionel Barrymore’s being followed by star-struck extras on the Cornell campus in Ithaca, N.Y., or D. W. Griffith using hand-forged iron gadgets to produce fade-outs while filming along an eroded canal tow-

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Back in Time: Near New York, Getting a Close-Up of the Silent Film Era

Irene Castle in the silent film "Patria" (1916), filmed in Ithaca, N.Y., where a silent movie museum is planned.

Tom Meyers, executive director of the Fort Lee (N.J.) Film Commission, right, at Rambo's Saloon, which was a setting in many silent westerns, left.

The Ithaca ghosts are kept alive with screenings and exhibitions. On Aug. 24, the Motion Picture Project is showing a 1923 Whitman comedy, with Oliver Hardy in drag. More screenings will be held in October, Ithaca's official Silent Movie Month.

In the hamlet of Cuddaceville, about 10 miles from Port Jervis, N.Y., and the Pennsylvania border, the hermit's lament I heard from Greichen Weecker, the executive director of the Neversink Valley Museum of History and Innovation, was, "Why isn't this Hollywood?" Griffith described the bend in the Neversink River there as "altogether the loveliest spot in America," with skies at twilight that were "transcendently illuminative."

The museum occupies an 18th-century farmstead, with a blacksmith's shop that may have been the tool that made the experimental film equipment.

The gallery displays a letter from Mary Pickford and a facsimile signed by Cecil B. DeMille and his wife, Constance. Across the street, store upscale apartments provide omissions backdrops for Griffith scenes of Jack Pickford playing a boy rescued from drowning.

Ms. Weecker and a museum trustee, Seth M. Barrow, showed me "Consi
ta, the Sioux," a 1909 drama about an American Indian woman who was a young mother from her unsuitable cowgirl lover. The climactic confrontations take place on scruffy Neversink Valley slopes and a porch with scrollwork brackets.

"I'm desperate to find that house," Ms. Goldman said. "Every time we throw this, we say: 'Does anybody know? Has anybody seen?'"

On Sept. 19, Mr. Modl, the pianist, will play during a screening of recently digitized movies made in Cuddaceville, mostly Mary Pickford comedies.

The museum staff is hoping for outbursts from audience members, reciting a poem or gleaning a screen, instantly just down the road.

A plaque near a supermarket at 2150 Pleasant Avenue notes that around 1913, the filmaker Alice Guy Blache set up a studio there called Axolot. It went bankrupt a decade later, soon after her husband was killed in a fire. The building ran off to Hollywood with a start.

"You do get a sense of Al's when you're shopping for your groceries," Mr. Meyers said, only a little dryly. This fall, amid a particular cliff of the New Jersey Hall of Fame, a grass-roots campaign called her "A Red Jersey Gal."

This summer, Fort Lee film lovers' protests staved off demolition of a white-painted clapboard house at 203 First Street that once housed Rambo's Tavern. Griffith and the comedy producer Mack Sennett hung out there, and many gathered often in its backyardRectrain, now a plane of pavement and grass.

"This was a real incubator for the film industry," Mr. Meyers said. The Darragh family lived near Rambo's, on Hammert Avenue. In 2001, their house was razed, despite outcry; to make way for brick town houses.

Outdoor movies (silent and talkies) are shown at the Fort Lee Community Center. Galleries for film artifacts are under construction near the George Washington Bridge.

"We're getting a sense of our history that's very marketable," Mr. Meyers said. The New York Times